The HAIR-TRIGGER BRAND

By REGINALD C. BARKER

Novels by

REGINALD C. BARKER

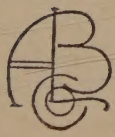
Wild-Horse Ranch
Gentleman Grizzly
The Hair-Trigger Brand

Each one volume, cloth 12mo. Illustrated in black and white and full color
Per volume $2.00

L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
53 Beacon Street - Boston, Mass.

THE HAIR-TRIGGER BRAND

By REGINALD C. BARKER



A. L. BURT COMPANY
PUBLISHERS
New York Chicago

Published by arrangement with L. C. Page & Company

Printed in U. S. A.

Copyright, 1929
BY L. C. PAGE & COMPANY
(INCORPORATED)

All rights reserved
Copyright in Great Britain, the British
Dominions and Possessions

Made in U. S. A.

TO

A CERTAIN COWBOY FRIEND OF MINE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Rustler's Son	1
II.	Betty Lorraine	12
III.	The Desert	28
IV.	Bart Hendricks of the Lazy T	42
V.	We Want That Man	56
VI.	The Darling of the Lazy T	70
VII.	In the Hands of the Law	83
VIII.	I Wish I Were Dead!	96
IX.	The State vs. Strain	109
X.	The Trial	122
XI.	Back at the Lazy T	137
XII.	Apache Spring	154
XIII.	Mike Shanan Shows His Hand	166
XIV.	Treachery	180
XV.	The Lariat	193

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVI.	The Escape	208
XVII.	Foiled	226
XVIII.	She's a-Callin' Yore Name	245
XIX.	At Bay	264
XX.	Hop-Toad Plays Ball	282
XXI.	The Hair-Trigger Brand	301

The Hair-Trigger Brand

CHAPTER I

A RUSTLER'S SON

WITH his great hands doubled into knobby fists, and his head hunched forward between his massive shoulders, "Hair-Trigger" Strain glared angrily at his son.

"Yuh can take it from me straight," he growled, "yuh'll either come with Shanan and me to-night, or I'll beat yuh up until yore own mother won't know yuh."

Twenty years old, and taller by an inch than his six-foot father, Bill Strain met the older man's glare with steady blue eyes which did not quail. Idly he slapped his bat-wing

chaparejos with his quirt as he drawled a slow reply.

"I ain't goin' with yuh, Dad. Jest 'cause yuh hate ol' Bart Hendricks of the Lazy T Ranch ain't no reason for yuh to try an' make an outlaw out of me. I ain't never rustled no stock yet, and I don't aim to start in now. If yuh want to die with yore boots two feet off the earth, go ahead, but I figger on dyin' in my bed."

The eyes of the father and son met, then the older man spat forth an oath and took a step forward. His huge fists were doubled and ready to strike.

"Once more I ask yuh," he said, "are yuh comin' with us to help rustle some of Bart Hendricks' cattle to-night, or have I got to manhandle yuh?"

Bill Strain paled slightly beneath his tan, but his voice did not falter when he replied.

"I told yuh, Dad, that I ain't goin' to ruin my life by becomin' a cattle rustler and an outlaw just 'cause I'm the grandson and the son of a couple of cattle rustlers. Go ahead and live yore life the way yuh want to. I ain't figgerin' on handin' yuh and yore gang

over to the rangers. I am just tryin' to be decent and make men forget that I'm the son of a cattle rustler."

It was a long speech for Bill Strain to make. Wondering at his own temerity, he fell suddenly silent. Above the corral near which he stood, a buzzard floated in the blue sky; from the chimney of a ramshackle house beyond, a wisp of smoke rose lazily; standing nearby, with reins trailing on the ground and head lowered, a buckskin horse swished a ragged tail at a very persistent fly. Then a harsh laugh from Hair-Trigger Strain rasped across the silence.

"Talk sense, Bill," he growled. "Yore grandaddy was lynched for killing ol' Bart Hendricks' son; one of yore mother's brothers was shot in a fight with a sheriff's posse, and me, I've been wanted by the law ever since I was knee-high to a chuckawalla. Yuh'll have a heck of a time livin' down an ancestry like that."

"I know it," admitted Bill soberly. "But somehow, some day I'll live it down. Yuh ain't got no right to try and ruin my life, Dad, just 'cause yuh've spoiled yore own."

Sudden rage flamed into the face of Hair-Trigger Strain at the persistent defiance of the boy; he shook a huge fist in Bill's face and muttered thickly.

"Yellow, yellow-spotted as a Gila monster is what yuh are, Bill, or yuh'd carry on the feud I've had with the Lazy T Ranch for twenty-three years. All right, go yore way, but get this straight, from now on yuh are no son of mine."

Leaning against the corral fence Bill Strain watched his father stride over to the buckskin horse, whip the reins over the astonished animal's head, then spring into the saddle and ride off toward the cactus-studded desert that stretched southward toward the Mexican border.

For a long time Bill Strain leaned against the fence; then he climbed onto the top rail and sat with his long legs dangling and his head between his hands, wondering in a disconnected way why life was so hard for him.

From childhood Bill Strain had been taught by his father to hate the law; from childhood he had been told that his grand-

father had been wantonly murdered by Bart Hendricks, owner of the Lazy T Ranch. The boy shuddered miserably as he remembered what his father had said.

"If I am killed, Bill, I want yuh to carry on the feud. I aim to wipe Bart Hendricks out, lock, stock and barrel. Promise me that if I pass out, yuh will do as I say."

Under such training it seems that Bill would have become an outlaw himself; it seems as though he would have been a blustering bully with a hand ready to draw his gun at the slightest provocation. That Bill had not become that kind of a man was a bitter disappointment as well as a puzzle to his father.

For at twenty, Bill Strain was still clear-eyed, with a burning dislike for cattle rustling and desperate deeds and all that appertains thereto.

This may have been due to the fact that he was compelled by law to attend school. There he had met the sons of decent ranchers; and there he had formed contacts which often resulted in his being invited to the homes of his boy friends, where he met people

so entirely different to his own family that slowly a wonder was born within him. For although Bill was but a boy, he could not help noticing the difference between decent men and women and those such as his own parents. And seeing that the boy was inclined to become a decent, law-abiding citizen, his friends tried to forget the stock from which he had sprung. Working against Hair-Trigger Strain, they would tell Bill that, in order to become anything worth while, he would have at some time to break away from his father's control.

Unusually silent and contemplative of mind for his age, Bill Strain was wont to think such matters over and weigh one against the other, until he arrived at various conclusions, the most important of which was that it was not worth while to be forever breaking the law. Sometimes he thought of trying to get his mother to take his part against the will of his father, but reflection always convinced him that such a course would be in vain; for even he could see that she had little will of her own.

Bill's mother was not really a bad charac-

ter; it was simply that she had become the victim of an environment which caused her to be completely dominated by the ruthless will of Bill's father. For so powerful was Hair-Trigger Strain's innate tendency to hate the law of the land, that he had actually talked his wife into believing that there was no crime in rustling cattle, and that the killing of an occasional man was merely incidental to the business of making a living.

Mulling these matters over in his mind, Bill sat hour after hour on the top rail of the corral, totally oblivious of the burning Arizona sun that was pouring down on him, unconscious of all things but his own misery. After a while he grew tired of trying to find a way out of it all and went over to the barn and saddled his horse.

"Let's go ridin' out where there ain't nothing but sun and cactus and wind," he said to the animal, "or I'll go crazy as a coyote in June."

Little did Bill imagine that right then, in a sun-blistered old shack in the Red Mountains, his own father was planning against him.

Leaning back in a massive home-made chair, with his booted feet on a rickety table, Hair-Trigger Strain was explaining the matter of Bill's delinquency—as he saw it—to Mike Shanan, his brother-in-law, right-hand man and partner in the cattle rustling business.

"Damn it," Hair-Trigger Strain was saying, "Bill actually had the nerve to tell me that it was not his fault that he was the grandson of a killer and the son of a rustler. D'yuh know, Shanan, there are times when I think that boy of mine intends to hand the whole bunch of us over to the rangers."

Tall of stature and red as to eyebrows and hair, Shanan removed a cigarette from beneath his flaring mustache and looked coolly at his partner.

"Yep," he agreed, "yore kid has certainly gone on the prod as far as cattle rustlin' is concerned. I was wonderin' how long it would be before you and he came to a showdown."

"The showdown came to-day," said Hair-Trigger Strain. "Bill says he ain't goin' to break no more laws than he can help. What can I do about it?"

"See that Bill kills a man," said Shanan, with as much composure as he would have suggested scotching a rattlesnake.

Hair-Trigger Strain looked rather startled, for it seemed to him that by some uncanny power of divination, his partner had guessed his own thoughts; then his features hardened into grim resolve.

"I'm willin' enough to do anything," he said, "if it'll make Bill carry on my feud with the Lazy T Ranch after I'm gone. But I don't see how we are goin' to do it."

"Anything can be done if yuh've brains enough to do it," stated Shanan. "And if something ain't done with Bill before long, there's a bunch of us hombres that will soon be headed for the pen,—and yuh'll be among 'em. Yuh let me talk to Bill. I'll get him into a fix that'll make our own hides safe."

Hair-Trigger Strain tossed away the butt of his cigarette and laid a red paw on his partner's knee.

"How are yuh goin' to do it?" he asked.

"I'm going to fix things so's he kills a man," said Shanan. "I'll cinch that son of yores so tight that we'll have no more reason

to fear that he'll double-cross us. How about it, Strain?"

"All right," muttered Hair-Trigger Strain. "Fix it any way yuh please, but—" his voice hardened, "yuh be sure that it is Bill who does the killing part of it. If anything happens to Bill, I'll kill yuh with my own gun, Shanan. For as long as Bart Hendricks lives, I can't afford to lose Bill."

"Yuh don't need to worry," Shanan assured him. "Just go ahead and round up our gang for to-night's raid. I'll attend to Bill."

As Hair-Trigger Strain rode away, Shanan gazed after him with a peculiar expression in his eyes. He was thinking that it might be a good idea to rid himself of both the Strains at once. For Shanan was beginning to see that the days of making money by rustling cattle were nearly at an end.

When that time arrived, Shanan meant to take the money he had made and start a cattle ranch of his own, and he wanted no partners. If he could eliminate both the Strains at once, so much the better for his own peace of mind. That Bill Strain was the son of his own sister, and that Hair-Trigger

Strain was his brother-in-law did not deter Mike Shanan from plotting their deaths; nor did he care that by so doing he would make his own sister a widow. Not for nothing had Mike Shanan won the reputation of being the most cold-blooded, calculating desperado in that section of Arizona. Because he was of that calculating disposition, he sat for an hour consummating his plot. Then he saddled his horse and loped away in search of Bill Strain.

CHAPTER II

BETTY LORRAINE

DURING his ride into the desert, Bill Strain had arrived at a decision that he thought would end his troubles. He had made up his mind to run away. Just where he would go, he did not know; but surely in the great world that lay beyond the desert there would be a chance for him to get a new start among people who did not know his folks and would not care whence he came. That the call of the desert ranges would be too strong for him, Bill did not guess; that he would stay in Arizona seemed such a remote possibility that he did not even give it a thought. Lying at full length on a knoll some little distance from his father's house, he gazed across the desert, watching the sun setting, and waited for darkness. While he lay there a cloud of dust appeared in the far distance; a cloud of dust which soon resolved itself into

a mounted man who was riding toward the ranch. A little later, recognizing the rider as Mike Shanan, Bill Strain arose and sauntered slowly to meet him. They met just as Shanan rode up to the corral.

"'Lo, Mike," greeted Bill, ignoring the word "Uncle," as he had been in the habit of doing all his life. "Looking for Dad?"

Tossing the reins over his horse's head, Shanan let the animal stand. Then he dragged the makings from his vest pocket and rolled and lit a cigarette.

"Howdy, Bill," he returned. "No, I'm lookin' for yuh. Let's go some place where we can talk."

"What's the matter with doing yore talking right here?" asked Bill bluntly. "If yuh are figgerin' on talkin' me into goin' with the gang on that rustlin' job to-night, I ain't goin', and that's that."

"Bill," said Shanan smoothly, "yuh've took the words out of my own mouth. I don't want yuh to come 'long. Fact is, I seen fur quite a while that yuh ain't like the rest of us; so I've come to advise yuh to break away

once and fur all." Pausing to let the news sink in, he stood looking at Bill Strain, trying to gauge the effect of his words. It was greater than he expected, for Bill thrust out an impetuous hand.

"I thought yuh had it in for me just like Dad has," he burst forth. "But—" a faint suspicion that all was not right caused him to withdraw his hand and fix his blue eyes questioningly on Shanan's face. "Do yuh think I really ought to cut loose from 'em all, and run away?"

"It's yore only chance, Billy," Shanan assured him. "Yore only chance to avoid the pen, or a dance on nothing at the end of a rope. If yuh don't cut loose from the rest of us, sooner or later yuh'll kill a man."

Shanan's tone appeared so sincere that it swept away the last lingering doubt in Bill's mind that all was not as it should be.

"Where shall I go and when?" he asked.

Clapping a hand on the boy's shoulder, his uncle looked him in the eye. Not the slightest hint of duplicity was in his voice as he spoke.

"I want yuh to take a letter to the ranch of

Two-Gun Lorraine. After yuh have delivered it, yuh can keep on goin' to wherever yuh please."

Taking an envelope from his pocket, Shanan handed it to the boy.

"I ain't sealed it," he pointed out; "I guess I can trust yuh."

"Yuh bet," responded Bill, as he slipped the envelope into his pocket. "When shall I start?"

"The moon rises at eight," said Shanan. "Yuh should reach Two-Gun Lorraine's place by one o'clock. Deliver the letter, stay at the ranch all night and go yore way at dawn." He caught Bill's hand and wrung it heartily. "S'long," he said, "an' good luck."

Bill turned to go and saddle up; then suddenly he faced around, as doubt again swept into his mind.

"Does my father know I am going?" he asked.

"It was he who suggested it," lied Mike Shanan. Then he added the Spanish farewell commonly used in the southwest, *"Adios, muchacho, vaya con Dios."* (Farewell, lad, may you go with God.)

Having saddled his horse, Bill stood for a moment hesitating, for he hardly liked to depart without bidding his mother good-by. But after a little reflection he decided to leave without saying anything, for he knew that she would ask innumerable questions which might be hard to answer. There would be time enough, he thought, to make explanations when he had made good in the great world which lay beyond the desert. So he merely turned in his saddle and gave one last look toward the thick walls of the low, flat-roofed, adobe house with the blue-shuttered windows, where twenty years previously he had been born.

None can make such a decision as Bill Strain had made without a little regret, and for a while he felt a sort of homesickness overwhelming him. Alone in the silver moonlight, he rode slowly up a white, dusty road that wound its way between a range of low hills, from which giant cacti stretched fingerless hands upward in eternal supplication for water.

Ten miles from his home, Bill turned his horse aside into a narrow ribbon of trail that

was little more than a cattle path. At midnight he drew rein on a low saddle between two conical summits of red rock. He looked down.

Beneath the moonlight a tiny trickle of water in the bed of the Gila River lay like a gleaming thread. On the further bank a horseman came into view and slowly disappeared around a bend. A moonbeam struck a white gleam from the steel barrel of a rifle carried carelessly across the saddle. When the ranger had passed, Bill Strain rode down out of the hills and splashed across the Gila River. As his horse scrambled up the sandy bank on the opposite side, he drew rein and looked back. Then he removed his Stetson and waved a last farewell to all that he was leaving behind.

Bill reached Two-Gun Lorraine's ranch a few minutes after one o'clock A.M. From the shadows cast by a huddle of low, adobe buildings, two or three big dogs of nondescript breed rushed toward the rider, barking vociferously. In one of the buildings a door opened and Bill saw a dark figure outlined against a dimly lighted room.

"Who comes riding?" It was an old woman's voice, high-pitched and strident.

"Bill Strain with a letter from Mike Shanan," replied the boy.

"Put up your horse," she ordered without coming forward. "I will make coffee."

Divesting himself of his chaparejos, Bill hung them on the saddle-horn; then he looked at his gun. Should he leave his belt and gun in the barn? Might as well, for perhaps the woman would take exception to his entering the house armed. So, weaponless, he stepped into a low-ceilinged room. It was Bill's first visit there, but although since childhood he had been used to similar conditions to those he saw before him, he thought the scene was the most poverty-stricken he had ever encountered.

Crouched in front of a sagebrush fire that burned in a rude fireplace, an old woman was stirring something in a big black pot. On a rickety table a cracked and discolored cup stood beside a tin plate. From the ceiling there swung a brass lamp of cheap manufacture, with a cracked and smoke-blackened chimney. As Bill entered, the old woman

straightened up and extended a claw-like hand.

"The letter," she demanded. "Give me the letter."

As Bill handed it over, a door in the farther end of the room opened and a girl entered. She appeared to be about Bill's own age. Bill thought he had never seen so much clustered black hair, nor such blue eyes as looked into his own. Not until afterward did he notice that she was clad in a cheap blue cotton dress. As the girl entered, the old woman glanced from her to Bill.

"Betty," she said, "this is Bill Strain."

A head taller than the girl, Bill stood looking down at her, and slowly a smile dawned on his lips.

"Pleased to meet yuh," he said, half bashfully. "I'm shore glad to know yuh, Betty Lorraine."

The girl stepped past him and picked up a blackened pot from before the fireplace.

"You must be hungry," she said. "I'll pour you some coffee."

There was a beef stew, hot with chili, and tortillas thin as paper. Over his plate, Bill

studied the girl who had seated herself at the opposite side of the table. They were exchanging news of the range, when outside the dogs began to bark furiously. Then a knock came at the door; the old woman opened it and stepped outside, leaving Bill and the girl alone.

"Seems like," remarked Bill, "I ain't the only one that's ridin' late to-night."

With parted lips Betty stared at the door as though she had not heard him, then to his astonishment she arose and stepped around the table. Her dark hair brushed his cheek as she bent over him.

"It is Buck Carroll," she whispered. "He has come for the letter."

Bill knew Buck Carroll, who was one of the gang of rustlers led by Hair-Trigger Strain. Between Bill and Buck Carroll a feud had existed ever since Bill had whipped the young rustler in a fist fight over the right way to treat a horse.

"Yeah," drawled Bill, "I reckon the letter contains orders from Mike Shanan."

"You fool," cried the girl, with a sudden fierceness that caused Bill to leap to his feet

and grasp her by the arm. "The letter you brought is from Shanan to the captain of the rangers. It will inform him just when and where your father and others of the gang are to cross the river with a bunch of cattle rustled from the Lazy T Ranch."

"The dirty, double-crossing skunk," blazed Bill. "So he is trying to get my dad killed." Wild with anger, he whirled toward the door. But Betty wrapped her arms around him and for a moment held him with unexpected strength.

"Don't be a fool," she said, sharply. "Buck Carroll is to kill you as you step outside. I overheard Shanan and granny plotting one night when I was supposed to be asleep."

Past reasoning with, Bill tore her arms apart. Then he reached up and extinguished the lamp, leaving the room in inky darkness. The next instant he had flung the door open and darted outside. If once he could reach his gun, there would be a short, sharp reckoning between himself and Buck Carroll. That there was not one chance in a thousand that he would reach the barn alive, Bill did not

stop to consider. The main thing was to get hold of that letter and save his father from capture or certain death. In less than a second these thoughts passed through Bill Strain's mind as he raced across the yard.

Not until he had covered half the distance did anything occur to stop him. Then it happened suddenly, for prowling among the shadows of the buildings two of the big mongrel dogs heard the steps of a running man. Barking with anger and excitement they tore after him, as dogs often do when a stranger invades their yard. Crossing his path, a gaunt, yellow brute snapped at Bill's legs, missed and went down in a yelping heap with one hundred and eighty-five pounds of manhood on top of him. Then streaks of orange flame spurted from the shadow of the barn. A forty-five Colt crashed out three times and man and dog lay still.

Silence then, the silence of death, with two scared dogs whimpering beneath the floor of the barn. In a dark room a lone girl crouched with terror-stricken eyes, as she listened to the sound of horses' hoofs clattering away into the desert.

Stealing out of the barn, where she had been hiding, the old woman approached the body of Bill Strain, gave it a kick as she passed, then went into the house.

Not until the sound of the fleeing rider had died away did Betty Lorraine stir. Then she arose and stood for a moment listening. Hearing nothing, she took courage to light the lamp. As she saw her grandmother step across the threshold, the girl clasped both hands to her bosom.

"Where is Bill Strain?" she asked.

"Buck Carroll killed him," cackled the hag. "Bill Strain is dead. He's laying out there deader'n a hawg. Where are you going?"

For the girl had stepped toward the door. Over her shoulder she said:

"I'm going to find him. Maybe he's not dead."

Fearfully, Betty stole toward a dark huddle on the ground, then she gave a low cry of pity. For Bill Strain lay flat on his back with white face turned to the stars. Dropping to her knees, she laid a trembling hand on his heart; it was still faintly beating. Ris-

ing to her feet, the girl hurried over to a watering-trough and filled a dipper which was kept there for drinking purposes. Returning, she soaked her handkerchief and gently sponged at a dark stain on one side of Bill's head. He stirred, opened his eyes, and said faintly:

"Give me that letter, d—n yuh, or I'll kill yuh."

It was ten minutes before he was able to sit up.

"Buck Carroll tried to kill you," explained Betty. "His first bullet grazed your head; his second killed a dog."

"Where is the letter?" asked Bill, still pretty much dazed.

"Buck Carroll took it with him," she replied. "He's gone."

Bill Strain staggered to his feet and looked down at the girl.

"If the rangers get my dad," he said, solemnly, "I'll hunt down Mike Shanan and every man in his band."

Side by side they stood beneath the stars, and for a moment neither spoke. Then Betty said softly:

"What shall I do, Bill? Dad was killed in a fight with the rangers years ago; mother died of a broken heart; granny isn't fit to live with; I'm all alone without a friend in the world."

She paused a moment, then said thoughtfully, "I wonder why I should have to suffer for what my folks did. My dad was a rustler, but somehow I'd like to be different from my folks."

"So would I," agreed Bill, hopelessly. "But who'll ever believe it?"

"We might go somewhere, Bill," said the girl softly, "and try and make something of ourselves. Something decent and honest like other folks."

"Yes," agreed Bill Strain, "we might; but I ain't got any right to go dragging yuh off."

"I've got to go," said the girl with sudden fierceness. "I'm scared of Buck Carroll. Mike Shanan and granny have been trying to make me marry Buck Carroll. And he wants me bad enough to come back for me. I can't stay any longer."

"Where would yuh go?" asked Bill again. "Yuh are only a girl."

She caught him by the arm and looked up into his face.

"I used to work for Bart Hendricks' granddaughter in the house on the Lazy T Ranch," she said. "Let's go to Bart Hendricks; he'll give us both jobs."

"Bart Hendricks," said Bill, slowly, "is the man who killed my grandfather. Dad hates him worse than poison. Bart Hendricks would probably try to kill me at sight."

"You don't know him," said Betty Lorraine. "He is not going to blame you for what your folks did. Take me with you," she pleaded. "Let's go and ask Bart Hendricks for work. I can't stay here."

Against his own good sense, Bill yielded to her persuasion, making a mental reservation that he did not have to stay once he had taken the girl to a safe place.

"I'll go get my horse out of the barn. Guess he can carry double for once."

When Bill returned there was a scared expression on his face.

"My horse, saddle and gun are gone," he said. "Buck Carroll must have taken them. What a blamed fool I was to leave my gun

on my saddle. Yuh got any horses at all?"

"One or two scrubs," replied Betty, "but they are loose on the range. Afoot we could not catch them."

"How far is it to the Lazy T Ranch?" asked Bill.

"About twenty-five miles," she told him.

Bill looked down at his high-heeled riding-boots with a wry smile.

"I guess," he said, "it is up to us to walk. If yuh've got any walking-shoes and outdoor clothes, maybe yuh'd better wear 'em. I'll be waiting."

When Betty rejoined him she was wearing a khaki shirt belted in at the waist and a gray flannel skirt. Around her neck was a red silk handkerchief. Beneath a wide-brimmed Stetson her dark hair clustered low on her neck. It struck Bill for the first time that she was rather pretty.

"Come on," he said abruptly. "Let's go."

The strident voice of the hag pursued them with curses, as, in the darkness that comes just after moonset, they struck across the desert.

CHAPTER III

THE DESERT

FIERCE revolt was in Bill's heart as he lessened his pace to accord with the short steps of the girl at his side, for he knew that without her he could have swung over those low, rolling hills at four miles an hour. Yet it did not occur to him to leave her. For, even if he had been alone, Bill knew that it was too late to do anything to keep his father from having met his fate. Doubtless, long before then, Buck Carroll had delivered the note from Mike Shanan into the hands of the rangers. That his father would be captured alive, Bill did not believe, for capture alive meant a trial, the outcome of which could not be in doubt. Often Bill had heard Hair-Trigger Strain declare boastingly that he had killed more men than he could remember, and that there was a thousand-dollar reward offered for him, alive or dead.

Well, if Hair-Trigger Strain's time had come, that was all there was to it. Bill had done his best to recover the letter, after he had discovered the perfidy of Mike Shanan. Having failed in that, there was only one thing left for him to do, which was sooner or later to wipe out Mike Shanan and his band. Having fully made up his mind about that, he bethought himself of Betty.

"Getting tired?" he asked.

"I'm all right," she said. "How are you making it in those high-heeled boots?"

"One heel is a mite sore," he acknowledged, ruefully, "but I guess I'll make it."

Topping the Red Mountains a yellow star heralded the approach of day, and from among the cactus-studded ravines arose a chorus of coyote voices. There was a quiver in Betty's voice when she spoke again.

"We are leaving behind us everything we know," she said. "Perhaps where we are going they won't want us at all. I'm afraid."

Bill was afraid, too, but it was no time to say so. So he tried to speak reassuringly.

"Sure they'll want us. We're willing to work, ain't we?"

"Just the same," pursued Betty, "old Bart Hendricks is the man who headed the lynching party that hanged your grandfather."

"From all I've heard tell," said Bill, "the old devil needed hangin'. The fact that he was my grandad is no fault of mine. I ain't responsible for the sins of my folks."

"Just the same," said Betty, with the prophetic vision that sometimes comes to a woman, "we're going to have a hard time living the sins of our folks down."

Seeing no particular use in arguing about it, Bill let it go at that, and for a time they were both silent. Suddenly Betty raised her hand and pointed toward the east.

"Look," she said, "dawn's breaking."

On a crumbling hill of yellow sandstone the boy and the girl stopped, gazed and perhaps wondered a little at the beauty of the desert dawn.

They were miles from a road by then. From where they stood they could look down on a vast plain; a dreary, waterless area where the only signs of vegetation were sticky-leaved creosote bushes and clumps of ocotillo thorn, and the only living inhabit-

ants lizards, rattlesnakes and horned toads. Far beyond the desert they could see the dim outline of a range of high hills, which Betty said were the Red Mountains.

"The desert right beneath us," said Betty, "is known as the Flaming Sink. The Lazy T Ranch is on the other side of it, at the foot of the Red Mountains."

"D'yuh mean we've got to cross that desert?" asked Bill, uneasily.

"Yes," replied the girl. "We've got to cross it to reach the Lazy T."

Bill surreptitiously shook the canteen at his belt. It was only a small one and it was less than half filled with tepid water.

"How far is it to Bart Hendricks' place?" he asked. It was the first time he himself had been in that section.

There was a puzzled look in Betty's eyes as she studied the country.

"I thought I knew the trail," she said, slowly, "but somehow things look all wrong. Do you suppose we got turned around during the night?" She motioned vaguely toward the distant hills. "The Lazy T should be about ten miles in that direction."

Bill shifted his feet uneasily, then scowled at the burning of his blistered heels. He was well aware that if they missed the ranch there was a mighty good chance of their dying of thirst.

"Maybe," he suggested, "we'd better go back."

Betty looked at him steadily for a moment; then she laughed lightly.

"If you were alone, you'd go on," she said. "We'll be across the sink before it gets too hot."

Pouring over the distant mountains, the rising sun painted the sides of the canyons with living colors of orange and crimson, as Betty followed Bill Strain down the yellow sandstone ridge into the breathless air of the Flaming Sink.

Without complaint the girl trudged beside him through the loose, gray sand of the plain, until, struck by her silence, he looked down at her. He caught his breath as he saw the drawn expression on her face, the dark circles beneath her eyes and the dryness of her lips. A pang shot through him as he suddenly remembered that in the excitement of their

flight they had forgotten to bring along any food, and his heart seemed to stand still as he realized that already Betty's strength was failing.

"There's a patch of shade at the foot of yonder ocotillo," he said. "Let's rest and take a drink."

Betty gave him a grateful glance as she took the canteen from his hand. Hardly knowing what she did, she shook it. Then she looked at Bill.

"I won't drink unless you do," she said. "There is enough for both of us."

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed. "I'm not dry. Go ahead."

Betty tried to laugh as she screwed the stopper back on the canteen.

"Neither am I," she said, huskily. "So let's save the water."

"What's the use of actin' like a mule?" burst out Bill. "If yuh should play out, yuh'll only make it that much harder for me."

She fought him for a moment with her eyes; then slowly she removed the stopper of the canteen, and held it out to him.

"Drink," she said evenly, "or I'll pour it onto the sand."

In his anger he was on the point of letting her waste the water; but his good sense came to his aid. Taking the canteen, he tipped it to his lips. But not until he had seen her swallow a little water did he speak. There was temper in his voice.

"There may come a time," he said, "when I'll have my own way. Meanwhile, we'd better be movin' along."

Higher and higher the sun rose. The heat became almost intolerable.

It shimmered in blue dancing waves over the gray sand. It beat down on the creosote bushes until the air was pungent with their disagreeable odor. It seared the lips and eyelids of the boy and girl until they were cracked and bleeding. At the end of another hour Bill took out his knife.

"Guess I'll have to cut holes in the heels of my boots," he mumbled. "My feet are burning up."

As he slumped down, Betty turned her back for a moment; then she held out two strips of white cotton.

"Bandage your heels with these, Bill," she said, "they'll keep out the sand."

A fiery breath swept across the desert as they limped onward. Ahead of them a lone dust-devil spiraled skyward, then skipped across the Flaming Sink in a crazy dervish dance.

With their failing sight fixed on the nearing hills, they staggered across another mile. Now they could see the palo verde bushes on the lower slopes of the Red Mountains. Now and again they passed a crooked mesquite bush, with pendant green pods swinging lazily in the heated air. Beneath a giant sahuaro cactus, they drank the last few drops of their water. There was a scant mouthful apiece.

Again they staggered to their feet, limped a few yards, stopped, and looked at one another. Then, as though struck by lightning, Betty crumpled to the sand.

"Leave me," she whispered as Bill bent over her. "I'm played out."

With fear in his heart, Bill stood looking at her; then wildly he gazed around in search of possible help. Suddenly he shouted hoarsely.

"There's somebody on horseback over there," he said, "and he's ridin' this way."

Drawing himself to his full height, he snatched his Stetson from his head and waved it wildly, in an effort to attract the attention of the rider.

Raising herself on one elbow, Betty peered at the rider through sun-scorched eyes; then she fell back weakly.

"It is Buck Carroll," she whispered.

Sudden fear clutched Bill's heart at her words. Unarmed as he was, it seemed as though he stood no chance whatever against the rustler, who, doubtless, was seeking Betty with the intention of taking her back. Then as he stared at the fast approaching rider, he saw something else.

The sun had disappeared behind a thick curtain of wind-borne sand that was racing up behind the oncoming rider. Should that sand-storm pass Buck Carroll and get between him and his victims, there was a chance that he might not find them at all.

"There's a sand-storm sweeping down on us," he said to Betty. "Maybe it will get between us and Buck Carroll."

Ripping his silk handkerchief from his throat, he stooped and tied it around the girl's face.

"It'll keep the sand out of yore eyes and mouth," he said.

Betty made no reply. Game to the limit of her endurance, she had borne the fearful heat uncomplainingly; but now she lay still, wilted, gasping.

Nearer and nearer thundered the approaching horseman. A half mile behind, the storm was racing at break-neck speed, as though trying to overtake him before he should reach his goal. One glance over his shoulder Buck Carroll gave, then he touched both spurs to his horse. Two hundred yards separated him from Bill Strain when he dragged his rifle from its scabbard; one hundred yards when he whipped it to his shoulder. Twice he fired, three times; then Bill Strain pitched forward on his face and lay still.

Reining his horse back on its haunches the rustler leaped from his saddle.

"Got yuh," he yelled, as he stepped up to Betty Lorraine. "Now jest to make sure."

Whipping his rifle to his shoulder he drew the hammer back and —

Rolling over, Bill suddenly grasped him around the knees and pulled him down.

So sudden and unexpected was Bill's onslaught that Buck Carroll was flat on his back before he knew it. The next instant his rifle was torn from his grasp.

Bill Strain leaped to his feet.

"Get up," he said tensely, "or I'll kill yuh where yuh lay."

Scrambling to his feet, the desperado faced the boy whom twice he had tried to kill; then slowly he backed toward his horse with his hands held high.

"I'll get yuh yet," he yelled. Then he sprang into the saddle, whirled his horse and fled into the heart of the desert as the sandstorm swept down.

Swearing at himself for having let the desperado get away with the horse, Bill Strain cast the rifle aside, then stooping, he raised Betty in his arms and staggered toward the lee of a gnarled and crooked mesquite which offered the only shelter. Seating himself with his back to the bush, he wrapped

his arms around the girl, trying his best to guard her from the flying sand.

Partly out of reach of the full fury of the storm, they huddled together for the better part of an hour, while all around them the air was a howling, yellow gloom. Driven into their clothes by the shrieking wind, the sand seemed to set them on fire. Their parched tongues were gritty in their mouths. Then, just when it seemed as though they could no longer bear the torment, the opaque gloom began to lighten. The sun came out again behind the yellow cloud as it fled across the desert; a desert that looked the same, yet strangely different. For where there had been hollows there were now dunes of gray sand, and where there had been dunes there were great hollows. Releasing Betty, Bill removed the silk from her face and arose to his feet.

"Don't leave me, Bill," she whispered, "I'm afraid to die."

"Die nothing," croaked Bill. "The storm has passed on and we are near the hills."

"Is Buck Carroll gone?" she whispered.

"Yeah," grunted Bill. "I ought to have

killed him, but somehow I couldn't with yuh around. Get up on yore feet."

Obedient to his exhortations, Betty tried to arise, but her strength was unequal to the task. She fell back gasping.

"It is no use, Bill," she said, "I'm played out. You'll have to leave me."

"I'll have to slap yuh," he said angrily, "if yuh don't shut up about my leaving yuh. That's no way to talk."

She looked up at him with an odd expression in her eyes.

"I'd forgotten," she said. "Sorry, Bill, but I'm only a girl."

He made no reply, but picked her up in his arms and told her to clasp him around the neck. Staggering with weakness, he made a hundred yards toward the hills before he laid her down.

"I'll find some water, pretty soon," he said, in what was meant to be a cheerful tone. "We'll be all right then."

Up again and onward. Bill's strength was ebbing fast, but he would not admit that, even to himself. The best he could do now with Betty in his arms was fifty yards. Tall

and rangy though he was, he did not yet possess the strength that would be his when he reached his manhood.

By sheer will-power he gained the foot of the hills at last and set Betty down in a shadow cast by a great red lava outcrop. Then, spent and gasping, he tottered where he stood, his mind bent on finding water before they both died. As he stood there he heard above him the clatter of shod hoofs on rock. With the last mite of strength he possessed, he shouted hoarsely.

CHAPTER IV

BART HENDRICKS OF THE LAZY T

THE next thing Bill knew, water was trickling down his throat. He gulped thankfully; it seemed that he could never get enough. Then he opened his eyes and sat up so suddenly that a man bending over him nearly dropped the canteen.

"Well," he chuckled, "come pretty near drowning you, danged if I didn't!"

He was not more than five feet in height, but his lack of stature was made up for by the immense breadth of his shoulders, set above a pair of legs so bowed that a jack rabbit could have darted between them without discomfort to the owner.

"A devil of a shenanigan," he grumbled. "Here was I ridin' along peaceful, when what did I see but a boy and a gal all tuckered out. Odd, ain't it?"

Bill opened his lips to speak, but his tongue was still so swollen that he could only

make an unintelligible noise and point vaguely to where he had left Betty.

"She's O. K.," said the stranger, answering the unspoken question. "I 'tended to her first. But the shadder had moved around, as shadders do, so I had to lay her the other side of the rock."

Bill made another effort to speak. The words came a bit thickly.

"Who are you?"

"Me?" The little man chuckled again as though at some joke known only to himself. "I'm 'Odd' Smith, foreman of the Lazy T."

As Bill slowly staggered to his feet and put forth a hand, the little man looked him up and down, and inexperienced in judging character though he was, Bill's intuition told him that he was being sized up as he never had been before.

The cold blue eyes of Odd Smith were not unfriendly, yet there was something in them that seemed to say: "I'd give a dollar and a half to know whether you are a man or a mouse."

"I guess Betty and I owe yuh our lives," said the boy. "I'm Bill Strain."

What the effect of his announcement would be, Bill had not thought, but the keen eyes of Odd Smith never wavered.

"The gal told me about yuh," he said. "I aim to declare yore pretty much of a man." Dropping Bill's hand he fumbled in the pocket of his chaparejos and produced a small package done up in tinfoil. "Have a chaw of gum," he invited. "It's powerful stimulatin'."

Betty was little the worse for her experience, barring a matter of cracked lips and sun-scorched neck and throat. Straight to Bill she walked and, before he could stop her, caught his hand in her own.

"I love you," she said naïvely; "you saved my life."

Blushing and uncomfortable, Bill cast an agonized glance at Odd Smith, but the little man had turned his back. Placing two fingers in his mouth, he blew a blast that echoed afar among the ragged hills.

"That had ought to fetch 'Hop-Toad,' " he remarked, "if he's anywhere within hearing."

In a few minutes a tall, sandy-haired

young fellow rode up on a blue roan. Drawing rein, he sat looking at Bill and Betty with slow wonder dawning on his freckled face.

"Hop-Toad," explained Odd Smith, "here's a boy and a gal all tuckered out for want of something to eat. Yuh can take the gal behind yuh and I'll take the boy. That'll kind of even up the weight, danged if it won't!"

"Bet yuh!" exploded Hop-Toad, who was apparently used to taking strange orders.

Beneath their double burdens the horses picked their way slowly among the scattered rocks. After an hour's riding they turned a shoulder of the hill. At the mouth of a great, wide canyon, Bill saw a maze of corrals. Nestling against the hill itself stood a big graystone house with red brick chimneys and a tiled roof.

Bill's eyes widened, and with an involuntary gesture he snatched off his hat, for above the roof towered a slender pole, from the halyards of which the flag waved gently to and fro in the light breeze that swept down from the heights.

The little man looked back over his shoulder with a wide grin.

"Purty, ain't it?" he chuckled. "It's the Fourth of July!"

As they dismounted in front of a big adobe building, Odd Smith turned to Bill.

"Better go in the bunk house and clean up a mite," he said. "Hop-Toad will take care of the horses. After a while yuh might come over to the Big House; likely Bart will want to talk with yuh."

Left to himself, Bill stood for a few moments glancing around. Blue smoke curling lazily from one of the big chimneys bore mute evidence that the cooking of a meal was in progress; else why a fire at that time of year? In the corrals white hens scratched industriously among the litter; two red hogs wallowed contentedly in a damp piece of ground near the watering-trough; from his perch on a low branch of a mesquite bush, a turkey gobbled at a hawk circling in the blue sky.

Around the house came trotting a great black dog; a mongrel of doubtful lineage and uncertain temper. Seeing Bill, the dog

stopped; then recognizing him as a stranger, the hackles on his shoulders began to rise and stiff-legged he advanced, growling low in his throat.

"Well," said Bill casually, "what's the matter with yuh?"

As yet uncertain that Bill had any business on the premises, but slightly baffled by the friendliness of the voice, the dog stopped and eyed him quizzically.

When Hop-Toad returned the great dog was reared up with his paws on Bill's chest. The boy was talking to him in a low tone and stroking his head.

Hop-Toad blinked, first at Bill and then at the dog.

"Sunshine and centipedes!" he exclaimed. "If that don't beat Hell! I never seen ol' Gringo act that a-way to a stranger before."

"Gringo?" Bill pushed the dog away and looked inquiringly at the tall cowboy.

"If yuh wasn't on the square," said Hop-Toad, motioning toward the dog, "ol' Gringo would have eat yuh alive. Never was but one stranger that the dog took to, and that's Betty Lorraine."

"You have some queer nicknames around here," observed Bill, for want of something better to say.

"Shore have," agreed the cowboy, rolling a cigarette. "Take me now, my kerrect name is Tom Clode, but a smart Aleck ups and calls me 'Hop-Toad' one day, and 'Hop-Toad' I've been ever since." He sighed reminiscently as he added, "So being what I was, I jumped him and laid him in the dust. We ain't seen him sence on the Lazy T."

Bill mentioned his own name; for it was obviously what Hop-Toad expected.

The tall cowboy blinked, and his jaw dropped so that the cigarette fell into the dust. But all he said as he shook hands was, "Aimin' tuh ride for the Lazy T?"

"I hope so," said Bill, "if Mr. Hendricks will give me a job."

"Mebbe he will and mebbe he won't," said Hop-Toad ambiguously. "But if he does put yuh to work he'll treat yuh square. Bart Hendricks is that kind of a man. Guess we'd better get some of the dust off of us now, for, jedgin' by the sun, chuck must be about ready."

A few minutes later a bell clanged up at the Big House, and for the further information of the stranger, Odd Smith appeared on the veranda.

"Come and get it," he shouted, " 'fore she gets cold."

Diffidently Bill followed Hop-Toad as he lounged toward the house. On the porch Odd Smith took Bill in charge and ushered him into a big dining-room, where he led him up to a tall, thin-featured man. He had cold gray eyes and a jutting chin, with a skin that was tanned to the color of old mahogany. He appeared to be between sixty-five and seventy.

"Bart," introduced Odd Smith, "this is Bill Strain, the boy I was telling yuh about. Bill, meet Bart Hendricks, owner of the Lazy T."

Bill looked at the old cattleman with undisguised curiosity. So this was the man who in early days had been at the head of the party which had lynched Bill's grandfather. Yet the tall old man who was now offering his hand did not appear to Bill like a killer, and in his brief life Bill had met

many. Quiet gray eyes, with little sun wrinkles at their corners, beamed down on Bill as Bart Hendricks extended his welcome.

"After we have eaten," added the old cattleman, "you and I will have a talk all to ourselves. Ah, here comes Margaret. I want you to meet her."

Bill caught his breath at sight of the vision entering the room. Never in his life had he dreamed that a girl could be so entrancingly beautiful.

Golden-haired she was, with eyes blue as an Arizona turquoise, and a skin as soft and warmly radiant as the petals of that rare flower, the cactus lily of the desert.

Bill hardly heard the voice of Bart Hendricks as he said:

"Margaret, let me make you acquainted with Bill Strain. Odd Smith says Bill carried Betty Lorraine a mile across the Flaming Sink."

"We are glad to see you at the Lazy T," said the girl, offering her hand. "I have a friend who married a young mining engineer who was at school with you in Mariposa.

Sometimes when she gets to hankering for a sight of her own country, Mary Allerton comes to stay with us. She has often spoken of you."

Bill murmured something in appreciation, then he took a seat indicated by Bart Hendricks.

At the head of the table the old cattleman arose to his feet.

"Some of the boys were bound to go to Blazing Rock to celebrate," he began, "which is according to what might be expected of boys in general. No doubt I was as bad—or worse—than any of 'em some fifty years ago. But now that I'm older, it seems to me that I get more kick out of celebratin' in my own home than I would raising particular Hades among a lot of strangers. So—" he raised his glass of water, "Odd Smith, Hop-Toad and you, Bill Strain, I want you all to drink this toast. Some fellow whose name I don't recollect proposed it a good many years ago. He's dead now, but his sentiments hold good to this day."

He ceased speaking as the others arose to their feet and raised their glasses. Then:

"Here's to Arizona. May her shadow never grow less."

As Bill sat down he experienced a queer choking sensation in his throat which impelled him to keep his eyes upon his plate.

Odd Smith stuck an elbow in his ribs and remarked:

"Have a spud?"

The conversation became general then, and Hop-Toad told an amusing anecdote about the turkey on a huge platter in front of Bart Hendricks.

As they arose from the table Bart Hendricks motioned to Bill to follow him into an adjoining room. Once inside, the old man closed the door and indicated a chair.

"Now," he said kindly, "tell me all about your troubles."

"First," said Bill, looking the cattleman straight in the eye, "I want to ask yuh a question. Have yuh heard whether the rangers got my father last night?"

Old Bart Hendricks tapped the floor with the toe of his riding-boot and parried the question by asking one himself.

"What would you do, son, if they had?"

"I don't know," the boy spoke slowly. "What I ought to do is to ride back and shoot Mike Shanan at sight, for he made me the innocent bearer of a letter to the rangers. But I don't know, Mr. Hendricks, I don't know. My grandfather was a desperado who died with his boots on; my father—is—a cattle rustler with blood on his hands and a price on his head. I have outlaw blood in my veins, sir, on both sides; but as yet I have no blood on my hands. If I should ever kill a man I don't know what would become of me; for I'm afraid I should not know when to stop."

The old man seemed to have fallen into a reverie as he sat hunched forward with his cold, impersonal eyes on the tortured face of the boy. God knows what scenes of the old frontier were passing before him as he looked back over the trails of more than fifty years! When at last he spoke, his voice was weary as that of one who long had borne a heavy burden.

"You know, of course," he said, "that I was the leader of the party who lynched your grandfather twenty-three years ago."

Bill nodded.

"Do you know why we hanged him without the formality of a trial?" asked Bart Hendricks.

"I always heard, sir," said Bill, "that he was caught rustlin' stock."

The old man shook his head. His voice held no bitterness as he unfolded the tragedy of his life in a few words. It was only weary, weary.

"Your grandfather killed my only brother," he said. "Shot him in the back on the open range."

Bill hung his head. It seemed there was nothing he could say.

The old cattleman continued as he fixed piercing eyes on the boy:

"And your father, Hair-Trigger Strain, shot my only son."

In the silence which followed, Bill could hear the ticking of a watch in the old man's pocket. Faintly the sound of people talking outside the house drifted through the thick stone walls. In those few moments it was given to Bill to feel upon his young shoulders the full weight of the sins of the fathers.

Silently he sat there knowing not what to say; words of condolence would have been so utterly out of place that he never even thought of them, but as he gazed upon old Bart Hendricks all humped over in his chair, Bill's boyhood fell away from him. He became a man. Grim-lipped and stern-faced he arose to his feet and looked down upon the old cattleman with a pity too great for words.

"Thank yuh, Mr. Hendricks," he said, "and good-by."

There came a knock at the door and a Chinese entered.

"You are wanted at the phone," he said.

Bart Hendricks arose and turned to Bill.

"Wait till I return," he ordered. "I have something more to say."

CHAPTER V

WE WANT THAT MAN

WHEN Bart Hendricks returned, Bill sensed at once by his expression that he had received momentous news. Not that the old cattleman looked exactly triumphant, yet in his eyes there was a certain satisfaction, like that upon the face of one who, lost on the desert, sees at last a trail.

"Queer," he said, and his voice trembled slightly, "how sometimes a little thing like a telephone call can change one's plans. After all you've been through, son, during the past twenty-four hours, I hate to ask you to do this. But seems like in this case it's your duty."

"You mean, sir?" said Bill interrogatively.

"The rangers arrested your father last night at the ford of the river," said Bart Hendricks, "after he had shot down three of their number. Hair-Trigger Strain is ly-

ing in the jail at Blazing Rock, badly wounded."

"Did he send for me?" Bill's eyes were stony as he asked the question.

"He doesn't know you are here," stated Bart Hendricks. "It just seems to me that you ought to be with him when he passes out."

"I don't want to see him again," exclaimed Bill.

"Son," reproved the old cattleman, "whatever Hair-Trigger Strain has done does not alter the fact that he is your father. You'd better come with me, or you'll have something to bother you all your life."

"I don't see how yuh can talk that way," said Bill, wonderingly. "He killed your son. I should think yuh'd be glad to see him die."

"No," said Bart Hendricks. "Forty years of thinking has made me realize that whatever were the crimes of your grandfather, I had no business to have helped hang him. I should have let the law take its course. Maybe it was I who started your father on the downward path. The only excuse I can offer is that in those days there wasn't much law in Arizona, and a man had to protect his own."

Bill was too young to understand all of the old man's reasoning; to him it seemed incredible that Bart Hendricks should cherish no rancor in his heart against the family which had wronged him so terribly. Bill could not realize that, with very rare exceptions, one ceases to hate a dying enemy.

"If your father dies," said the old man suddenly, "the score will be evened."

Bill looked up sharply at that.

"No," he said, "it will mean but the startin' of a new chapter, for I shall kill Mike Shanan."

"Don't do it, son," advised Bart Hendricks earnestly. "Sooner or later Shanan will get what's coming to him. Just because you happen to have the blood of bad men in your veins is no more reason for you to become a killer, than there would be for my old black mongrel dog to become a wolf."

"All right," said Bill. "While I can't exactly figger out yore line of reasoning, I get the idea that yuh don't want me to become an outlaw, any more than I want to become one myself. But—" his eyes grew stubborn, "sooner or later I'll meet Mike Shanan, and

between him and me there will be a reckoning."

"Then you'll come with me to Blazing Rock?" asked Bart Hendricks.

"Yes," replied Bill, "to please you, I'll come."

In the late afternoon Bart Hendricks and Bill Strain rode into Blazing Rock. They had a hard time to find a place to tie their horses. For, through telephone and by mounted messengers, the news had spread from ranch to ranch, that at last the notorious outlaw, Hair-Trigger Strain, had been captured. In front of every hitching post and around every telephone pole there stood saddled horses of all sizes and colors. From the horn of nearly every saddle hung a pair of chaparejos of black or white angora, or of russet calf-skin with silver conchos down the outside of each leg, or just plain leather ones, much scratched by cactus and shiny from wind and weather. It was notable, however, that few guns had been left upon the horses. The guns swung from the hips of bronze-faced men with keen eyes, who stood chatting at nearly every corner.

All eyes were turned on Bart Hendricks and his companion, as slowly they rode down the street; often the cattleman exchanged greetings with old friends he had not seen for months, and always the buzz of voices followed the two riders.

"That's old Bart Hendricks, whose son was killed by Hair-Trigger Strain."

"I've heered tell that Bart hung Hair-Trigger Strain's father about twenty-five years ago."

"Who's the boy ridin' with Bart Hendricks? Looks like a rustler himself."

A heavy-set, evil-eyed man spoke loudly, so that the passing riders might hear.

"Boys, the feller with ol' Bart is young Bill Strain."

Quickly as flame in touchwood, the news spread from mouth to mouth, and a ripple of excitement became evident in a sudden rise of voices that until then had been quiet. A half-drunken cowboy yelled an objectionable epithet at Bill.

The boy's face flushed with anger; but Bart Hendricks spoke quietly.

"Don't start anything now, son. They are in a hanging mood."

Forcing himself to swallow the insults which now poured in at him from every side, Bill turned to Bart Hendricks.

"The man who started this," he said, "is Buck Carroll, who carried the letter that betrayed my father into the hands of the law. Buck Carroll is Shanan's right-hand man."

Bart Hendricks knit his bushy white brows, but he did not make any comment, for just then they reached the county jail.

In front of the door they were halted by two lean-faced, mounted men wearing the uniforms of the border rangers. They held carbines lightly across the front of their saddles. They paid no attention to Bart Hendricks, but stared at Bill as though determined to mark down his lineaments in their memories. Yet when Bart introduced Bill, not by the flicker of an eyelash did either ranger show that he had ever heard the name before.

"You can hitch your horses to those rings in the wall, Mr. Hendricks," said one of them, when the old cattleman stated his business. "We'll keep an eye upon them while you are inside."

Hair-Trigger Strain had not yet been placed in a cell, but lay on a cot in the office of the sheriff, who arose from his desk as the visitors entered the room.

"Sheriff Austen," said Bart Hendricks, "I want you to meet Bill Strain. He is Hair-Trigger Strain's son."

Bulky Sheriff Austen hoisted himself out of his chair and extended a hand like a ham. His steel-colored eyes bored into Bill's.

"Shake," he boomed. "Then go talk to yore dad."

Hair-Trigger Strain raised a hand in a weak gesture of dismissal as Bill approached.

"Get out," he snarled between bared teeth. "Yuh are no son of mine."

Bill flushed at the tone; then he tried to harden his heart and turn away without replying. But it was no use; in spite of his utmost efforts to renounce the outlaw who had sired him, the bond of blood was too great; so, standing by the bedside of his dying father, he poured out his story of how he had been duped into carrying the letter.

The wounded outlaw listened intently with a scowl upon his pallid features. Not

yet was he ready to believe that his son had not given the information which had lured him to his doom.

"Yuh lie," he gasped. "Yuh were the one who wrote the note. The ranger captain showed it to me; it was signed with yore name."

Bart Hendricks turned to the sheriff. "Have you the note?" he asked.

From a locked drawer in his desk, Sheriff Austen took a sheet of paper which he handed the old cattleman.

The note was to the effect that some time between midnight and dawn on July 4th the notorious outlaw, Hair-Trigger Strain, would cross a certain ford of the river with some cattle rustled from the Lazy T. It was signed "Bill Strain."

Wonderingly the sheriff watched as Bart Hendricks produced a pencil which he handed to Bill.

"Sign your name beneath this signature," he requested.

As the unformed boyish writing crawled across the paper, both men could see in an instant that the original signature was not that of Bill Strain.

Holding the note before the eyes of the dying man, Bart Hendricks said:

"Look at those two signatures, Strain; your boy did not lie."

Twice Bart Hendricks had to explain before the outlaw opened his eyes; then as he realized that Bill had spoken the truth, he tried to speak, but no sound came from his lips. Weakly his groping fingers felt around. Sensing his desire Bill slipped his hand into one of his father's. Gripping it tightly, Hair-Trigger Strain passed on.

So quietly had the end come that Bill himself was not aware of it, until Bart Hendricks placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"We'd better go now," said the old man.

Startled into a realization of his loss, Bill stood for a moment looking down at the face of his father. Then, with a frozen look upon his features, the boy followed Bart Hendricks out of the sheriff's office and through the outside door of the jail, before which the two rangers were still on guard.

In front of the jail was a crowd of some fifty men and boys, most of them riders, with a scattering of prospectors who had

come to Blazing Rock to spend the Fourth.

As Bart Hendricks and Bill stepped onto the wide porch which fronted the jail a murmur arose from the crowd. One or two men half drew their guns. Pushing his way through from the rear, a burly, mule-faced individual with a coil of rope in his hand assumed mob leadership.

"You Bart Hendricks?" he bellowed. "We want that man."

"Speaking to me?" Bart Hendricks' tone was as mild as butter. "If you mean that you want Hair-Trigger Strain, boys, he's beyond your reach. He died five minutes ago."

Nonplused at the abrupt termination to his hopes of a lynching party, for a moment the bully recoiled, then his eyes chanced on Bill.

"What if Hair-Trigger is dead!" he snarled. "That's his boy. We'll hang the whole darned family and get rid of 'em lock, stock and barrel. How about it, boys?" he appealed to the milling crowd.

One or two of the less warlike spirits began to edge toward the outside of the ring; but the younger and more turbulent ones were carried away by the idea of taking a man's life.

"Sure," sang out a young tough. "Let's hang the whole works."

Fired by the idea the crowd took up the cry. "Hang him, hang him!" Like one man they began to surge forward.

Erect in their saddles the two rangers looked down at the men with disdainful eyes; as yet they had not even taken the trouble to raise their carbines.

"Better go home and 'tend to your knitting, you men," said one, urging his horse forward so suddenly that the big man carrying the rope beat a precipitate retreat.

"That's right," said the other ranger. "There won't be no hanging while we are on the job."

"Yah!" shouted the mule-faced man from a safe distance. "There's only two of 'em. We can rush 'em."

Bill was unarmed, but a forty-five Colt swung from Bart Hendricks' hip. Now he drew it, and addressed the crowd.

"Now, you men, if anybody has reason to hate the Strain family, I guess it is I. One of 'em killed my brother; one of 'em killed my only son, and one of 'em—the last of the

Strains—has come to me, so that he may get away from his own blood and lead a decent life. What are you? Coyotes, that you want to kill a boy for that?"

The door of the jail opened behind old Bart Hendricks and Sheriff Austen stood there with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

"What's all this?" he boomed. "Get back home, the bunch of you, before I place you under arrest." His great voice mellowed as he added, "And I don't want to have to do that to-day, boys. It is the Fourth of July."

Somewhere among the crowd a man laughed. It was taken up by others. Then, their emotions touched by the appeal to their patriotism, the crowd began to cheer. Sheriff Austen raised a hand to command silence.

"Hush, boys," he entreated. "A man lies dead in there."

Abashed, the crowd fell silent and began to disperse; all but the mule-faced man who had wanted to see a lynching. Stung to fury with disappointment, he stooped, picked up a stone the size of a baseball and flung it with all his strength at Bill Strain.

Struck in the mouth, Bill staggered and

fell backward into the arms of Sheriff Austen. Instantly recovering himself, he brushed the blood from his gashed lips and leaped from the porch.

Straight up to the man who had struck him he strode.

Disdainful of the boy's youth the bully made no attempt to draw his gun, but with doubled fists awaited his opponent. When Bill was within three feet of him, he swung a terrific right to the boy's bleeding mouth. Bill laughed, ducked, and with a straight left to the jaw, knocked the mule-faced bully down and out.

"Some wallop!" exclaimed one of the rangers. "Say, Bill, where did you learn to box?"

Bill blushed and looked uncomfortable. "Who? Me?" he asked. "Why, a young mining engineer down at Mariposa taught me a little about it. Fellow by the name of Allerton."

"Not Jim Allerton!" exclaimed the ranger.

"The same," said Bill.

"Shake," said the young fellow as he

leaned down from his saddle. "I'm Jim Allerton's brother, Jack. You going to ride for the Lazy T?"

"I hope so," said Bill. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing," grinned the ranger. "Only maybe we'll meet again. Once in a while I ride that way."

CHAPTER VI

THE DARLING OF THE LAZY T

BILL was too tired then to attach any significance to Jack Allerton's statement that he was in the habit of riding over to the Lazy T. The blow with which he had knocked out the mule-faced man had been the last flare-up of a strength that, during the twenty-four hours just passed, had been strained almost to the limit of its endurance. Murmuring some unintelligible response, he followed Bart to a hotel, where they obtained rooms for the night.

"Want to eat, son?" asked Bart.

"Eat?" repeated Bill with the mists of sleep beginning already to veil his eyes. "No — guess not — tired — out." As the last word dragged out, he crumpled down on the bed. He did not awaken even when Bart pulled off the riding-boots with the holes Bill had cut in the heels. With the boots came

the two strips of bandage given the boy by Betty Lorraine on their trip across the desert.

The old cattleman swore softly beneath his breath as he saw the raw, inflamed heels showing through great holes worn in the socks. Then he left the room quietly.

When Bill awoke next morning the sun was shining in beneath the blind of the open window. From somewhere came the faint coo of a mourning-dove. For a moment the boy lay still, luxuriating in the softness of the mattress and the clean, white sheets. Then, as realization of his surroundings came back to him, he flung the covers aside and swung his feet to the floor. He sat for a minute staring, for by the side of his bed stood a pair of morocco leather riding-boots, soft and flexible as kid. Draped over their tops were two pairs of brand new socks of bright colors, such as a boy might like. There was no note of any kind with them, but Bill's old boots with the holes in the heels were no longer in the room.

Then, half concealed by a fold of a quilt which had fallen from the bed, Bill caught sight of a strip of something white. It was

one of the bandages given him by Betty. Hardly knowing why he did so, he rolled it up and slipped it into his shirt pocket. Suddenly he realized that his heels were no longer sore. As he examined them he gave a low whistle, for over the open wounds had been applied a film of—though Bill did not know this—collodion, upon which were superimposed strips of adhesive tape.

With gratitude flooding his whole being and shining from his blue eyes, Bill dressed himself and descended to the lobby, where he found old Bart Hendricks reading the *Range News*.

"Mr. Hendricks," began Bill, "I want to thank you—"

"It's all right, son," interrupted the old man. "Do they fit?"

"Like a glove, sir."

"Then don't say any more about it, son; just wear 'em out. Guess we may as well go and eat now. I let you sleep a couple of hours longer than I should have; but I reckon you needed it."

Over the breakfast table the old man outlined his plans.

"Of course I have no strings on you, son," he began, "but I've kind of taken a notion to you. If you care to come and ride for the Lazy T, all right. I'll start you at thirty-five and your chuck. And I'll furnish you with a saddle and a gun."

"I don't think I shall carry a gun," said Bill, looking him straight in the eye. "I want to keep my hands clean."

"I get your point," acknowledged the old cattleman, smoothing a wrinkle in the table-cloth with the tines of his fork, "but you've got to carry a gun on the range. Sometimes you run into a critter bogged down too deep to pull out with your rope, and sometimes you run across calves being branded by men too bad to handle without a gun."

Still Bill hesitated.

"It seems to me," he said at last, "yuh are takin' a long chance in havin' me around at all. Yuh know the kind of blood that flows in my veins, Mr. Hendricks. What will yore friends say when they find that yuh have in yore employ the son of Hair-Trigger Strain?"

"I'm old enough not to care in the least

what people say," stated the old man. "And while I was never caught rustling stock in my younger days, I was not what one might call an angel myself. As to the outlaw blood in your veins, that's all hokum. Most of it exists in your own mind."

"But," expostulated Bill, "my grandad killed yore brother, Mr. Hendricks, and my father killed yore only son. Why are yuh willin' to extend a helpin' hand to me?"

"Maybe it is to ease my own mind," said the old cattleman. "When, twenty-three years ago, we lynched your grandfather, that chapter was closed so far as I was concerned. Your father began another one when he killed my son; then, chapter by chapter, the killings went on for twenty-three years until yesterday. Sometimes it was one of the Lazy T boys who died; sometimes it was a cattle rustler. Yesterday the feud ended with the death of Hair-Trigger Strain. If you are a criminal because you are the son and grandson of men who had no regard for the law, then, I, too, am a criminal; because in leading the party which hung your grandfather, I, too, was defying the law."

As he concluded his peroration, old Bart Hendricks put out his hand.

"Let's bury the hatchet, son," he pleaded, "and try to live things down."

Two days later Hair-Trigger Strain was buried at the edge of the desert he had loved.

That night Buck Carroll told Mike Shanan the story of Bill's flight with Betty Lorraine across the Flaming Sink, and the subsequent protection of both the boy and the girl by old Bart Hendricks. Shanan stroked his red stubbled jaw reflectively as he listened; then his eyes grew hard.

"That'll make more trouble for us," he said. "The only way to make our hides safe is to do away with Bill Strain. He ain't likely to forget the way we got rid of Hair-Trigger Strain." Laying a heavy hand on the younger rustler's shoulder, Shanan spoke impressively. "If I know anything about the nature of the Strain family, young Bill will never rest until he has avenged the death of his dad."

Buck Carroll showed his yellow teeth in a wolfish grin.

"I got a score of my own to settle with Bill Strain," he said thickly. "He aims to steal my girl. Yuh leave him to me, Shanan, and I'll see that he gets all that's coming to him."

Shanan laughed harshly as a thought struck him.

"Don't fool yoreself about Bill Strain," he said. "He ain't goin' to tie up with a girl like Betty Lorraine. She ain't got nothin' and Bill ain't got nothin'. But—" he leered evilly, "Margaret Hendricks will own the Lazy T Ranch when the old man passes out. I'll bet yuh even money that Bill Strain figgers on marryin' the old man's granddaughter and becomin' the owner of the Lazy T."

"Yuh shore got a head on yuh, Shanan," said Buck Carroll admiringly. "I would never have thought of that."

"Bet yore sweet life I got a head on me," boasted Shanan. "And because I been doin' some thinkin', I tell yuh to lay off of Bill Strain for a while. I got an idea we can make a stake out of old Bart Hendricks and get rid of Bill Strain at the same time."

Lowering his voice, he outlined a plot

which caused Buck Carroll to gasp with surprise.

As for Bill, with the quick forgetfulness of youth, he was shedding his old life as a moth sheds its cocoon, and like a moth, was attracted by the brightest light he could see, which happened to be that shining out of the starry eyes of old Bart Hendricks' granddaughter.

Beginning with her grandfather and ending with old Chuck Loon, the Chinese cook, pretty, impressionable Margaret Hendricks was the darling of the Lazy T. In the sunshine of her presence the sternest mood of the old cattleman melted as snow vanishes before the breath of spring. Beneath the scepter of her loveliness, grizzled old Odd Smith thawed out, and for hours would beguile her with tales of the range. Perfectly impartial in her coquetry, she distributed her smiles and badinage among the waddies, with the democracy common on the cattle ranches of the southwest. Yet none of the Lazy T boys had ever dared to aspire to her heart and hand; for well they realized that Margaret would fall heiress to the two thousand head

of cattle which bore the Lazy T brand, and the fifteen hundred acres of desert range which comprised the ranch. Then came Bill Strain with his eager blue eyes, his quiet, slow smile, and his taint of outlaw blood.

Bart Hendricks himself had told Margaret the story of Bill's parentage. He had told the girl the worst about the grandfather and father of Bill Strain, little dreaming that in so doing he had presented Bill in the light of a hero to the romantic girl.

So, in the weeks that followed Bill's arrival at the Lazy T, Margaret studied him and watched him and thought about him, until the glamour of his past began to occupy her mind to such an extent that sometimes at night she would lie sleepless, wishing that they might ride together beneath the desert stars. At such times Margaret would try to forget that she had half promised Border Ranger Jack Allerton that she would at some time become his wife.

Little dreaming that he was in a fair way of becoming supplanted in the girl's affection, Allerton was a frequent visitor to the ranch. Apparently Margaret was glad to see

him as ever, but soon he began to sense a difference in her attitude toward him—a difference so subtle that it was hard to define, as though the girl had withdrawn herself behind a barrier of reserve, much as at sunset the cactus lily closes its pink petals, and enfolds them within sepals armed with thorns.

With the skill of a born coquette Margaret parried his thrusting questions, and laughed teasingly as she disclaimed that any change had occurred in her. But Allerton knew, as only a jealous lover could know, that there would come a time when he and Bill Strain would clash. And in spite of himself the ranger wondered to what lengths the outlaw blood which ran in the veins of Bill Strain would lead him, when the clash came for the right to woo and win the heart of Margaret Hendricks.

As for Bill himself, he fitted into the daily routine of the ranch as though to the manner born, which in a way he had been, for from the time he was old enough to remember, he had been able to ride. Long before he had come to work on the Lazy T, he had been ac-

knowledged as one of the best riders in his locality. In that land where nearly every man is a born rider, the horsemanship of Bill Strain was such that it evoked the admiration of Odd Smith himself.

"Looks like part o' the horse he's ridin', don't he?" remarked the foreman one evening to Margaret, when Bill rode back from Blazing Rock in all the glory of a new pair of silver conchoed chaparejos, and wearing around his neck a silk the color of the sunset.

"He looks like a centaur!" exclaimed the girl romantically. "A perfect centaur!"

"A senator!" chuckled Odd Smith, who had little knowledge of mythology. "No, sirree! Bill Strain looks just like what his dad was,—an outlaw."

"I hate you!" flashed Margaret. "I think, Odd, you're perfectly horrid. It isn't Bill's fault that he has outlaw blood in his veins."

"Not by a dum sight," agreed Odd Smith, "but he'll have a hard time making the world believe it."

"I don't care," burst out Margaret, stamping a booted little foot until her spurs

jingled. "I don't care what the world says, Odd."

Leaning against the corral fence, Odd Smith watched her as she tripped across and hailed Bill Strain. Then a shadow for a moment clouded the little foreman's eyes, and he turned toward the house leaving the two chatting together.

"It wouldn't do," muttered Odd Smith cryptically. "No, sirree, that wouldn't be right a-tall."

As Odd Smith stepped onto the wide veranda he came face to face with Betty Lorraine, who had been sweeping, but now was leaning on her broom, gazing at Margaret, standing with one hand resting on the neck of Bill Strain's horse.

"Dreamin'?" asked the little foreman, looking at Betty with a kindly gleam in his blue eyes, "or just lazy?"

"Oh, Odd!" exclaimed the girl with a hint of sadness in her voice. "What use is it to dream?"

Placing his hands on her shoulders, Odd Smith looked keenly into her eyes. Then slowly he released her.

"Kinda stuck on Bill, ain't yuh, Betty?" he asked, nodding toward the corral.

"I could die for Bill Strain," whispered Betty softly, "I love him so!"

"Well, why in heck don't yuh tell him so?" asked Odd Smith, "'stead of mooning around like a calf that's lost its ma? Don't yuh go and get the fool idea in yore pretty head that there will ever be anything between him and the boss's granddaughter; for before I would see Margaret Hendricks married to Bill Strain, I'd—" He did not finish what he had been about to say, for suddenly from the yard came the furious barking of the dog, Gringo, and the clatter of a horse's hoofs.

Betty gave one look, then, dropping her broom, she fled into the house, for, in flapping bat-wing chaparejos and a steeple-crowned sombrero, mounted upon a chestnut that sported a fancy bridle with silver-chased bit, Buck Carroll rode up to the veranda. Drawing rein, he stared insolently from his saddle into the quiet blue eyes of Odd Smith.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE HANDS OF THE LAW

"SOMETHING yuh wanted?" Odd Smith asked, as he sized up the lowering features of the man in the saddle. "We ain't hirin' any hands just now."

"I ain't come to ask yuh for a job," retorted the rider. "Wouldn't ride for the Lazy T nohow. I'm Buck Carroll. Maybe yuh've heard of me."

"Maybe I have," agreed the little man standing on the veranda. "I'm Odd Smith, boss of the Lazy T. What did you aim to see me about?"

"I ain't aimin' to talk with yuh," snarled Buck Carroll. "Where's ol' Bart? It's him I want to talk to."

"So?" drawled Odd Smith. He extracted a packet of chewing gum from his shirt pocket and slipped a little gray wafer into his mouth. "What did yuh want to see the ol' man about?" he asked.

"None of yore business," snapped Buck Carroll, with a venomous glance. "I aim to talk to ol' Bart himself."

"Reck'n yuh'll have to wait quite a while then," grinned Odd Smith. "For the ol' man has ridden into Blazing Rock and won't be back until morning. Maybe if yuh tell me what yuh want, I can help yuh out."

"Yuh have a girl here named Betty Lorraine," said Buck Carroll. "I have come to take her back to her grandmother. The old woman is dyin' and figures on seein' me and the girl safely married before she passes out."

Rhythmically moving his jaws to and fro, Odd Smith eyed the dark face looking down at him. Then he shouted:

"Hey, Betty."

Twice Odd Smith had to call before she came. Tall, slender and blue-eyed she stood in her pink gingham dress, staring at Buck Carroll with terror in her eyes.

"Hello, Betty," said Buck Carroll with a leer. "I've come to take yuh back. Yore granny is dyin' and aims to see yuh and me married before she passes out."

"No," stammered the girl drawing closer

to Odd Smith. "I won't go. I am going to stay here."

"D'yuh hear that?" asked Odd Smith, turning narrowed eyes on Buck Carroll.

"It don't make no difference what she wants," blustered Buck Carroll. "She and I are engaged. I shall take her with me."

"It makes all the difference in the world," retorted Odd Smith. With the suddenness of a striking snake, he drew his six-shooter and covered the man on the horse. "Betty don't have to go with yuh if she don't want to; so I reckon yuh can just call yoreself degaged. Get going, hombre, while the going is good."

The eyes of the two men met. Odd Smith's were deadly cold, but those of Buck Carroll were furious with thwarted intent. Yet he had no chance just then and he knew it. With an oath, he whirled his horse, stabbing its flanks with his spurs so that the tortured animal reared in agony. Then with an ugly laugh he shouted over his shoulder:

"Yuh got the drop on me that time, damn yuh; but just yuh wait, ol' timer, until I come back."

With one arm around Betty's waist, Odd Smith stood watching Buck Carroll out of sight. The black dog, Gringo, was barking at his horse's heels.

When the foreman reported the occurrence to Bart Hendricks, the old cattleman looked serious.

"Of course you did right," he said, "in refusing to turn Betty over to Buck Carroll. But it looks to me as though once more trouble is brewing for the Lazy T."

"Looks that a-way to me, too, Bart," concurred Odd Smith. "And say, do you know what I've been thinkin'?"

"Shoot," said Bart, who looked upon his foreman almost as a brother.

"Guess yuh've noticed that Margaret is getting kind of thick with Bill Strain, ain't yuh, Bart?"

"I have," admitted the old man slowly, "and I've been wondering whether I made a mistake in trying to help the boy out."

"A man can't make too many of those kind of mistakes," drawled Odd Smith, "but just the same,—yuh know how it is, Bart. Yuh wouldn't want Bill to marry yore girl."

"Bill Strain is square," said Bart quickly. "He's got the makings of a real man in him."

"Maybe," admitted Odd Smith, "and maybe not. But whatever he makes of himself won't alter the fact that his folks were no 'count."

"I can't tell Bill to get out now," objected Bart. "Not after I told him I had faith that he would make good."

"Seems like what is needed," suggested Odd Smith, "is another woman here. Kind of a middle-aged woman with good sense. One that could tell Margaret a whole lot of things that yuh and me can't—in short, a kind of a shapy roan."

"Chaperone, you mean," said Bart Hendricks.

The eyes of the two men met, then Bart laid a hand on his foreman's shoulder.

"You are a good man, Odd," he said, "but I have no other kin; no sister that I could get to come here and live. That's why I've had to do the best I could raising my little girl alone."

"I have, though," Odd Smith said informatively. "I've got a widowed sister with a

face like an ax, a tongue as mean as a cholla burr, and a heart as good as gold. Being a widow, she's got a kind of a hard row to hoe. I reckon she'd be only too glad to come here, Bart, and kinda look out for yore little girl."

The old cattleman tapped nervously on his desk with the tip of a pencil. He felt somewhat uneasy at the thought of having a housekeeper; yet he realized that Odd Smith was right.

"Where does your sister live?" he asked. "And when could she come?"

"Lydia lives in Ashtabula, Ohio," replied Odd Smith, "and I reckon she could pull stakes at any time." Determined to press his point, he added, "We could have Bill Strain send a telegram from Blazing Rock this afternoon."

As Bart Hendricks still hesitated, he heard outside the room the sound of Margaret's voice speaking to Bill, who had come to the house in response to the dinner call of the cook. Suddenly the girl's voice sank to a whisper. Then Odd Smith gave Bart a quick glance, for from the other side of the door there had come the distinct sound of a kiss and a giggle.

"All right," said the old cattleman, "wire your sister this afternoon."

Bill Strain was unusually quiet as he saddled his horse after dinner; so quiet that he aroused the suspicions of Hop-Toad, who was standing by his horse rolling a cigarette.

During the six months which had elapsed since Bill's arrival at the Lazy T, a staunch friendship had sprung up between him and the freckle-faced cowboy with the ludicrous nickname. Taking advantage of this friendship, Hop-Toad grinned across his horse's back.

"Why so glum, cowboy? Anyone would think yuh were goin' to be hung."

"You, too, Hop-Toad?" There was a certain ugliness in Bill's tone which the cowboy had never heard before. "Can't you let a fellow forget?"

"Huh?" Hop-Toad was so surprised that the cigarette fell from his fingers, then he flushed as he realized what his question had implied. "Aw!" he exclaimed, "I was just kiddin'."

"It's all right, Hop-Toad," said Bill, "but I wish I didn't have to ride in to Blazing

Rock, and sometimes I wish I had never come to the Lazy T."

"Keep a-smilin'," grinned Hop-Toad. "It'll all come out in the wash."

"I don't know whether it will or not," said Bill. "Everywhere I go I see people looking at me, wondering when my outlaw blood will break loose and make me kill a man." The boy's voice was pitiful as he added, "And I don't want to break loose, Hop-Toad."

He broke off suddenly and, vaulting into the saddle, turned his horse's head down the road which led to Blazing Rock. Looking after him, Hop-Toad shook his head.

"Bill has a hard job ahead of him, Tony," he said to his horse. "Lord help the man who crosses him when he feels like he feels now."

Mile after mile the dusty white road fell behind the clattering hoofs of Bill's horse as he rode at an easy lope toward Blazing Rock. To the northward the iron ramparts of the Red Mountains rose sheer from the cactus-studded desert, among which could be seen scattered bunches of cattle of different brands. To the southward the desert stretched to the Gila River, beyond which

lay Mariposa with all its sinister memories. Memories that came crowding back upon the boy like ugly specters leaping from the shadows into the glare of the day.

Brought up in the roughest type of community, and inured from childhood to hearing the talk of men who were at no time particular in the choice of their language, Bill was old beyond his years. Not yet of age, his was the brain of a man of twenty-three or four, and as such he was conscious that although the people with whom he came in contact were, for the most part, willing to accept him at face value, yet subconsciously they never forgot the strain of outlaw blood which flowed in his veins. Bill realized well that from Bart Hendricks down he was watched, as is a horse which once has established a reputation for meanness. For a time he had not cared; but now he was not so sure—not since Margaret Hendricks had kissed him.

As to whether Bill loved her or she him, he did not yet know; but certainly he thought they loved each other, as a boy will think when going on twenty-one. It was Bill's

first love affair, and it bade fair to be his last, for overwhelming it like an ugly dark cloud was the thought of the bar sinister—the outlaw blood which flowed in his veins.

"You can't live it down," clattered the hoofs of his horse as he rode into Blazing Rock. "You can't live it down."

Having dispatched his telegram, Bill looked around for something to do, for he intended to ride back to the ranch by the light of the full moon. Save for a few loungers tipped back in their chairs in front of the hotel, and a couple of horses standing with drooping heads in front of their hitching posts, the one street of the little cow-town was almost deserted. Hearing the sound of a phonograph in a pool hall Bill strolled within.

Behind a soda fountain a man was wiping glasses. Bill seated himself upon one of the high stools and called for an ice-cream soda.

"You from the Lazy T?" asked the man as he served the order. "Seems like I seen the brand on that horse of yourn."

"Uh, uh," grunted Bill, without looking up.

"How's that outlaw kid making it?" asked the clerk. "Has he broke loose yet?"

"Talking about me?" drawled Bill, sliding off his stool and leaning across the counter so that his blue eyes bored into those of the dumbfounded man.

"Say! I didn't know. My mistake," blurted the little clerk, backing away from the deadly glare in Bill's eyes. "I'm a newcomer here—I thought—"

Bill tossed a silver quarter on the white marble. "It's all right," he said, "but men have been killed for asking less than that." Fighting down his rising anger, he left his ice-cream soda untasted, and strode to the back of the room where two men were knocking the ivory balls across the green-topped pool table. At Bill's approach they looked up; then one of them gave an ugly laugh.

"Look who is here," he said. "Bad Bill Strain from the desert."

It was Bull Murdock, the mule-faced man whom Bill had knocked down in front of the jail.

With tightly clenched hands Bill backed away, whereupon the mule-faced man advanced threateningly.

"I'm not seeking trouble," said Bill. "'Tend to your game."

"'Course you ain't," sneered the bully. "Your kind never do, unless they can hit a man when he ain't lookin'. What did you come to town for, if you ain't lookin' for trouble? Old man Hendricks chase you off for gettin' gay with that gal of his?"

Bill's right fist shot out then, with all his hundred and eighty-five pounds behind it. Full on his sneering mouth that fist caught the bully and hurled him backward against the pool table. As he put out a hand to steady himself his fingers closed around a billiard cue. With a roar of fury he charged, raising the hardwood cue above Bill's head. The next instant it was twisted from his grasp, broken in two and hurled aside; then Bill's left fist crashed into his stomach, and Bill's right foot caught him behind the heel and tripped him, and with the cowboy on top, together they crashed across the edge of the pool table and rolled to the floor.

Shouting for help, the soda-fountain clerk rushed outside, leaving Bill pounding the bully's face with his fists. Then into the

pool hall strode Jack Allerton, the ranger, with a thirty-eight Colt automatic in his hand.

"Get up," he commanded Bill curtly, prodding him in the ribs with the toe of his riding-boot.

As Bill rose to his feet, the mule-faced man's partner yelled at the ranger:

"Arrest him. It's Bill Strain. He has killed Bull Murdock."

"Guess I'll have to take you along, Bill," said the ranger. "Going to come quietly, or have I got to use these?"

Tight-lipped and white-faced, Bill Strain shuddered as he looked at the shining steel handcuffs.

"It's all right, Ranger," he said quietly, "I'll come along."

CHAPTER VIII

I WISH I WERE DEAD!

WITH the mule-faced man's partner blustering at his heels, Bill Strain accompanied the ranger to the sheriff's office, where the ranger filed a murder charge against him.

"There was me and Murdock peacefully a-playin' pool," began the dead man's partner, "when this son of a durned outlaw comes raisin' all kinds of Hades with us. Being peacefully inclined, Murdock remonstrates with him, when he ups and bats Bull over the bean with a cue and knocks him cold."

Sheriff Austen's face was impassive as he made formal entry of the charge.

"All right," he said, "that's enough, Blodgett. You can tell your story to Judge Allen, before whom the accused will have his preliminary hearing at ten o'clock to-morrow morning." Then he took a bunch of keys

from his pocket and motioned to Bill Strain to follow him.

"But, Sheriff," began Tim Blodgett, "I aim to tell you—"

"Ranger," said Sheriff Austen, turning to the arresting officer, "show this man out of the office. I'm busy."

Down a narrow corridor to a heavy door topped by a steel lattice, the sheriff led the way. To the rattle of keys the door creaked slowly inward; at a motion of the sheriff's head, Bill Strain stepped into the cell. The sheriff followed him.

"Tell me about it," he said, with his keen old eyes fixed on the boy's face.

Bill Strain sank down on the iron bunk that was fastened to a wall of the seven-by-ten cell. His eyes wandered like those of a wild animal trapped and fearing death.

"What's the use?" he demanded. "I haven't a chance."

Sheriff Austen had handled all kinds of criminals in his day. Watching the boy's face he knew that Bill Strain was merely reacting to his sudden terror at finding himself under arrest; that with his mental faculties

partially stunned, his thoughts were racing chaotically, reasoning out nothing clearly, but obsessed with a terror of the all-powerful law which all his life he had been taught to fear. Hemmed in by those four stone walls, pencil-marked with the ribald remarks of departed occupants, it seemed to the old sheriff that the boy was apt to turn sullen, if left to himself to brood before he had had a chance to open up.

"Better come back to the office, Bill," he suggested. "I want to talk to you."

Raising his head, the boy looked at him questioningly. Could it be possible that there was kindness in the iron hand which had clutched him? Was he after all to have a fighting chance to make good? Slowly he rose and followed Sheriff Austen to his office. Responding to tact and kindly questioning, somewhat incoherently Bill told his story.

"It looks bad for you," admitted the officer, when at last Bill slumped in his chair, "and I have no alternative but to hold you. However, Bart Hendricks told me a great deal about you, and I'll talk to Judge Allen,

before whom you will have your preliminary hearing in the morning. Seems like things are changing for the worse; twenty years ago you would not even have been arrested for what seems to have amounted to accidental manslaughter in a bar-room fight. The only thing I cannot understand is, that while you have admitted striking Murdock, you won't tell me why."

"I can't, Sheriff," repeated Bill Strain for the fiftieth time. "I can't tell anybody that."

"Was it on account of a girl?" asked the sheriff, with sudden acumen.

By the sudden flush that crimsoned Bill's face, the sheriff knew he had hit the mark; but the boy shook his head stubbornly.

"I guess it was just the outlaw blood in me," he said, "aiming to raise a little bit of Hell." That was all he would say.

Back in his cell, Bill sank down upon his cot and stared at the stained walls. Through the barred little window a sunbeam stole, and lingered a moment on the boy's fair hair. Somewhere outside a desert thrush was singing; glad because he was free.

What was the use of trying to do right? What was the use of trying to overcome the heritage of outlaw blood bequeathed him by his ancestors; of trying to shatter the bar sinister which loomed like a dark shadow across the pathway of his life? Might as well go to the devil and have done with it. When he got free? If he got free? What did they do to people who hit other people so hard that they died? But he hadn't—or had he? He was not quite sure about that now. Maybe it had all been an ugly dream. Couldn't have been a dream though; the walls of dreams were impalpable. One cannot rage to and fro between the four walls of a dream; one cannot pound on them until his knuckles are bleeding. Had he been pounding on the walls of his cell? Must have, for that was blood dripping from the ends of his fingers —outlaw blood dripping on the stone floor.

Rattle of keys in the door. Who was coming now? The sheriff to question him again? Darn the old fool! Bill did not want to be interrogated. He wanted to think.

Slowly the iron latticed door of the cell swung inward. The sheriff entered with a

tray of food and steaming coffee, which he placed in a niche in the stone wall.

"Grub-pile," he announced. "Come and get it."

For a moment he waited for an acknowledgment, then as Bill did not choose to speak, he clanged the door behind him, leaving the boy alone in the creeping dusk.

Seated on the edge of his cot, with his face between his hands, Bill stared at the tray of food with hostile eyes, sulkiness and pride struggling for the mastery over the natural instincts of his youth. In the end youth won, as always it will.

The tray was empty when Sheriff Austen returned. Sprawled on the cot, Bill lay with his head pillowed on his arm, just as sleep had found him. He did not waken; not even when the sheriff swept the cell with the white beam of his flashlight. Little did that officer imagine that Bill was dreaming of Margaret Hendricks.

The hot night gave way to a hotter dawn. Unrelieved by a single gleam of sunlight, above Blazing Rock a sullen sky hung like a saffron canopy. In the close confinement of

his cell Bill woke to find his clothes sticking to his body, for he had neglected to undress. Tousle-headed and with a bad taste in his mouth, he flung his long legs to the floor, out of humor with himself, moody and dangerous as a caged beast. With an ugly look in his eyes he sat staring at his torn knuckles.

The sound of a key being turned aroused him from his reverie—if reverie it could be called. The door opened with a creaking of rusty hinges, and Bart Hendricks entered the cell. Behind him the door clanged shut.

"Sheriff phoned that you were in trouble, Bill," he said, seating himself by the boy's side. "Said that it seemed like you needed a friend. Odd Smith and Hop-Toad came along too; maybe between us we can help you out."

Bill listened in silence. It was all too impossible. He had never imagined that the boys of the Lazy T would stick by him in his hour of need. Conscious that all the evidence was against him, he had imagined that he would receive the justice—or injustice—which obtains in other lands, where men are sentenced to the penitentiary for trivial

crimes, then given the chance to escape, only to be shot down in cold blood.

"Do yuh mean, Bart," he asked at last, "that yuh are going to make them turn me loose?"

"Can't exactly do that, Bill," replied the old cattleman, "but we are going to see that you are given counsel, and a fair trial. Now tell me this, son, why did you break Bull Murdock's neck with a blow of your fist?"

Bill set his jaw stubbornly as he looked Bart Hendricks in the eye.

"That's something I'd rather not talk about," he said.

"Was it because he said something against me?" persisted Bart Hendricks.

"No."

"I'm an old man," said Bart Hendricks, "and maybe I've seen more than you imagine since you came to work on the Lazy T. Tell me, Bill, did the fight occur over my granddaughter?"

"If yuh were young again," asked Bill quietly, "would yuh save your own hide by bringing a girl's name into a matter like this?"

"I get you, son," said the old cattleman, as he arose to his feet. "Guess I'll be going now."

At nine-thirty A.M. the sheriff came again and took Bill to the court of Judge Allen for his preliminary hearing.

In his day Judge Allen had been a slim-waisted rider of the desert ranges, but thirty years had changed him to a corpulent giant of sixty, with a kind face that somehow had never altogether lost its tan. Impartially he listened to the testimony of Tim Blodgett. Not a muscle of his face changed when Ranger Jack Allerton told of arresting Bill. His eyes were impassive when he turned to Bill Strain.

"Do you wish to enter a plea?"

"I struck Bull Murdock with my fist, yore Honor," admitted Bill, "but I did not mean to kill him."

"Why did you strike him?" asked the judge.

"I'd rather not say, yore Honor."

"Do you mean that you refuse to explain why you struck Murdock?" persisted the judge.

"Yes, yore Honor," replied Bill.

"Have you any counsel?" asked Judge Allen.

"I will engage counsel for Bill Strain in this case, your Honor," offered Bart Hendricks, "and I will furnish a cash bond for his appearance, if the court will permit."

"Under the circumstances," replied Judge Allen, "I cannot admit the prisoner to bail. The case is remanded to the District Court. Until then the prisoner shall remain in the custody of the sheriff."

With his four-gallon hat set at an aggressive angle, and his spurs jingling, followed by the broad, short figure of Odd Smith, Hop-Toad planted himself in front of Bill and the sheriff as they left the court room.

"Here's a billy-doo, cowboy," said Hop-Toad, thrusting an envelope into Bill's hand, "an' say, don't yuh go to scratchin' yoreself to death in the hoosegow while yore waitin' to be turned loose. We need yuh, cowboy, on the Lazy T."

"Better take a chaw of gum back with you, Bill," advised Odd Smith, offering him a package. "It kinda helps a man to think."

Then, solemnly as a little desert owl, he followed Hop-Toad across to the hitching rack where their horses stood.

"Cow hands," observed Sheriff Austen, "are a good deal like the desert. You got to understand 'em before you can love 'em."

The sheriff's philosophy fell short of its mark. Bill did not even hear him. Tightly clenched in his suddenly burning hand, he grasped the note Hop-Toad had handed him. Bless her soul, ran his thoughts. Margaret had not failed him in his hour of need. He almost awakened the sheriff's suspicions that he was about to make a break for liberty, so unseemly was his haste to return to his cell, with the graystone walls. Kind walls now, that would give him the privacy he desired in which to read his "billy-doo."

As they passed into the sheriff's office a thin little man of sixty, with a meticulously clipped white mustache, arose from a chair.

"How do you do, Sheriff Austen," he greeted, with the utmost formality. "I have been engaged as counsel for the defense in the case of the State vs. Strain."

Sheriff Austen acknowledged the greeting and turned to Bill.

"This is Mr. Justus McQuarrie," he said. "Mac, meet your client, Bill Strain."

"Hush, not a word, I implore you, Mr. Strain," said the little attorney as he put forth a hand small as a woman's. "The very walls of this office may have the power of understanding. Sheriff, may I be permitted to hold a secret conclave with my client?"

Bill grinned in spite of himself, but the sheriff did not allow the vestige of a smile to cross his rugged features.

"You are lucky, Bill," he said. "Justus McQuarrie is one of the most capable lawyers in Arizona."

Then he turned to the little attorney.

"Guess you and Bill can talk things over in the cell," he said. "It's the most private place I know of."

" 'Oh, solitude, where are thy charms—' " began Lawyer McQuarrie, and he managed to complete the stanza just as the cell door clanged behind him and Bill Strain.

Darn the luck, thought Bill. Would the inquisitive little man never cease his eternal questioning? But not until he had taken voluminous notes, did the attorney express

himself satisfied. A few moments later the sheriff let him out.

Bill dumped himself on the cot. With the impetuosity of youth he pressed to his lips the note Hop-Toad had handed him, before slitting the envelope with his thumb-nail. Bill's face was a study, as he read the brief message scrawled on a half sheet of paper.

BILL STRAIN:

I don't believe you did it, but if you did, I love you just the same.

BETTY.

"To Hell with everything!" cried Bill in his disappointment. "I wish I were dead!"

CHAPTER IX

THE STATE VS. STRAIN

FOR hours Bill lay motionless on his cot, with his hot face pressed into his pillow, and his brain a chaos of seething thoughts, a mass of incoherencies revolving around a central point, which was the face of the girl he imagined he loved. With the egoism of youth, he had supposed that she would be the first to let him know of her belief in his innocence; in fact, he would have been willing to have bet his life that, upon hearing of his trouble, Margaret Hendricks would have saddled her horse and spurred madly to the jail. That such an act would neither have been permitted by her grandfather, nor compatible with her character, never had entered his head. Ready and willing to sacrifice his own liberty on the altar of chivalry, he had fancied she would meet him half way.

Bill did not know that self-pity is one of the strongest foes youth has to fight; he could

not realize that he possessed an exaggerated opinion of his own importance. To his immature mind, he was a very much abused man, against whom all the world was leagued, just because he was unfortunate enough to carry in his veins the blood of two generations of outlaws. This conviction at last assumed dominance over all else; which is not so strange, when one remembers that the idea had been dinned into his ears from childhood.

At last Bill's rage wore itself out, giving way to a choky feeling, which caused the hot tears to well out of his eyes and soak into the grimy pillow.

As to Betty and the note she had sent him, he deemed neither worthy of consideration. He did not even take the trouble to ask himself whether she really loved him, for illogical as it may seem, in view of his own ancestry, Bill thought himself just a little superior to Betty Lorraine.

Having worked himself into such a state of mind, Bill became sullen and uncommunicative, replying in monosyllables to the advances of Sheriff Austen, who in his heart

pitied the boy; nor would he give any further information to the precise little attorney, when Justus McQuarrie desired a conference.

"What's the use?" demanded Bill surlily. "I have no chance at all."

"I cannot understand the changed attitude of my client," Lawyer McQuarrie confided to Sheriff Austen. "At our first conference, Mr. Strain seemed willing to co-operate with me to the fullest extent of his ability. But now—" he passed a thin hand over his clipped white mustache, and knit his bushy brows. "May I ask you, Sheriff, if my client has received any communication which could have been responsible for a shock to his psychic forces?"

"If you'll talk plain English, Mac," suggested the sheriff, "maybe I'll get you."

"A letter, for instance," said the attorney shrewdly, "from a—ah, a young woman?"

"Thunder!" ejaculated the sheriff. "You *are* smart, Mac. I'll give you credit for that! Yes. The day we were leaving Judge Allen's court, Hop-Toad, of the Lazy T, handed Bill a sealed envelope. Probably he has it with him now. Let's go talk to him."

"A laudable intention," said the lawyer, "but exceedingly poor judgment, for, unfortunately, such an act might only serve to arouse my client's antagonism. This, ah—cowboy with the ludicrous cognomen, do you wish me to understand that he is employed on the Lazy T Ranch?"

"Hop-Toad is ridin' for Bart Hendricks," acknowledged the sheriff.

That afternoon Gringo, the black dog of the Lazy T, chased a Ford coupé across the yard, and barked anathema at Lawyer McQuarrie, as he crossed the veranda and knocked upon the door of the house.

It was opened by Betty Lorraine.

With a courtesy which took no account of age or station, the little attorney doffed his fedora.

"How do you do," he said. "I have called to see Mr. Hendricks."

"Mr. Hendricks is out ridin'," said Betty, "but his granddaughter is at home."

"Would you be kind enough to inform Miss Hendricks," requested the little man, "that a—ah—friend of her grandfather's begs the privilege of a few moments' conversation?"

Margaret Hendricks arose from a piano, as Betty ushered Lawyer McQuarrie into a large room, with a lofty ceiling and a great stone fireplace. She was wearing a blue dress that clung caressingly to her curves.

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you, Miss Hendricks," explained Lawyer McQuarrie, "with a view to obtaining some information."

"You are—?" She stepped back a pace and stared at him with what appeared to be sudden fear.

"Attorney for the defense," supplied Lawyer McQuarrie, crisply, "in the case of the State vs Strain."

"I know nothing whatever about anything connected with the matter," asserted the yellow-haired beauty, turning on her heel.

"Of course you do not," agreed the little man. "I did not suppose you would write a —ah—note to a cowboy."

"Note!" Unconscious of the trap into which she had fallen, she whirled on him. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "What note? Who wrote it?"

"Do not excite yourself, I pray, Miss Hen-

dricks," said Lawyer McQuarrie soothingly. "I do not know who wrote the note. That is what I came here to try and find out."

If he had intended to anger her, he had succeeded. With one hand clasped against her heaving bosom, she looked down at him with scornful blue eyes.

"I tell you I didn't write a note to Bill Strain!" she insisted, stamping a little foot.

"I cannot imagine you capable of such an act," said the little attorney, "but perhaps you can form an opinion as to who did write the note."

"Of course, I can," snapped the angry girl. "It's that Betty Lorraine. And I'm glad of it. I'm glad of it. I hope Bill Strain marries her. They'll be two outlaws together."

Through the portières which separated the sitting-room from the dining-room, Lawyer McQuarrie caught a glimpse of Betty's face. Her eyes were those of a suddenly startled deer. Courteously he bowed to Margaret Hendricks and took his departure.

Betty was waiting for him on the veranda. Timidly she put a hand on his arm.

"I couldn't help hearing," she said. "You won't let them hang Bill, will you?"

Lawyer McQuarrie's manner changed. Here was a character which must be handled in a different manner. His face wore a genial smile, and his voice was almost fatherly, as he put an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"Would you come and tell the judge all you know about Bill Strain?" he asked.

"Would I!" exclaimed Betty rapturously. "If only I could do something to help him."

"To-morrow I will send you a paper which will order you to appear as a witness," said Lawyer McQuarrie kindly. "Tell the judge the truth, and perhaps you and Bill Strain will return to the Lazy T together."

The following day Betty was served with a subpœna, summoning her to appear before the District Court as a witness in the case of the State vs. Strain.

Meanwhile, the news that the son of the late Hair-Trigger Strain had been arrested for murder had spread across the ranges. Had the accused been anyone else, little attention would have been paid to such a case; as it was, tongues began to wag, not so much about Bill Strain himself, as concerning the

notoriety which attached itself to his family name.

"Yeah," observed one grizzled old-timer to another rider he met, "his grandad was an out an' out bad hombre, and the boy's own father was a killer; seems more'n likely that Bill Strain will follow in the footsteps of his folks."

"Reck'n the jury'll turn him loose?" This from the long-faced cow-puncher to whom the old-timer was speaking.

"I don't know," admitted the older man. "If Bill were a woman with bobbed hair and pretty ankles he'd be given a gold medal; but seeing that he is who he is, and seeing that Arizony has come to be what she is now-a-days, seems to me that the boy stands a mighty good chance of spending a few years in the pen."

"Maybe it would be the best thing that could happen to him," observed the long-faced puncher, with the intolerance common to youth. "We sure don't need any more outlaws here in Arizona."

"You've got the wrong idea, son," said the older man. "If it's in Bill to become a rustler

and killer, sending him to the pen is sure going to boost him further along the downward path. No. Give the boy a show, say I. 'Tain't his fault his folks were outlaws. Arizony ought to give Bill Strain a chance to make good."

"Maybe you're right," allowed the long-faced puncher thoughtfully. "Anyway, it ain't for you and me to judge. Guess you'll be at the trial?"

"Wouldn't miss it for a herd of three-year olds," asserted the old-timer. "Going to be there yourself?"

"I guess most every rider that can get away will be there," shouted the younger man as he rode away.

These were but two of the hundreds of riders who, from cattle ranch, sheep camp and lonely desert road house, arrived at Blazing Rock the night before District Court went into session. Before every hitching rack horses stood all night long, munching baled hay and oats, for it was impossible to secure other accommodation for them. On the board sidewalks in front of the hotels men, still wearing their chaparejos, sprawled

with their heads on their saddles; in the pool halls the click of ivory was heard all through the night. In front of the jail some enterprising camp cook out of a job had erected a hot-dog stand out of packing cases. Above it his red face shone beneath a flaming torch.

"Hot dog! All hot! Two bits apiece! Come and get 'em," his raucous voice beseeched continually.

Talk of the trial among the milling crowd. Talk of the trial the whole night long.

"Yuh called for jury service, Jim?"

"Bet yuh. Yuh too, Clown-Face?"

"Not me, Jim. I ain't eligible; I was pinched once for mistakin' the brand on a Bar Y steer."

"Guess yuh'd be in favor of turnin' the kid loose then, Jim?"

"Would I? I'll tell the world!"

Talk of the trial, arguments, fights, and two lean-faced rangers riding up and down the main street—riding up and down among the milling crowd all that night.

"His grandad killed Bart Hendricks' brother."

"Yessir, and the Lazy T boys hung him fur it, too."

"He got three of them first though. Yes-sir, Bill Strain's grandad killed three of the Lazy T boys nearly thirty years ago."

"Queer old Bart Hendricks would give the boy a job. I'd think he'd have been scared to do that. Yuh know old Bart has a granddaughter?"

"Yuh bet. I heerd tell that Bill Strain's father killed Margaret Hendricks' dad."

"But the rangers got Hair-Trigger Strain at last. He's buried over yonder at the edge of the desert."

Talk of the ranges. Talk of sudden death. Talk of the trial the whole dark night.

"Getting along toward morning, Ranger."

Jack Allerton looked down from his saddle.

"'Lo, Hop-Toad. 'Lo, Odd. Yes, sky's paling above the Red Mountains." He touched his horse with his heels, and rode between two wrangling punchers, wearing flaming silks and bat-wing chaparejos.

"Don't get to scrapping, boys," he warned.

The white street in the white dawn. The lean, leathery faces of the crowd.

"Hot dog! All hot! Two bits apiece! Come and get 'em!"

The yellow flaming torch paling in the fierce white light of dawn.

Out of the desert into the crowded street of Blazing Rock rode a man and a girl; a big-hatted, white-haired old man, and a young girl with dark circles beneath blue eyes.

"That's old Bart Hendricks. Who is the girl with him? Not his granddaughter! That ain't Margaret Hendricks. She's got yaller hair."

Hats came off here and there, in honor of the dark-haired girl riding beside the old cattleman. They did not know her, but that made no difference. Her sex entitled her to the courtesy of the range.

Buzz of tongues as Bart Hendricks assisted Betty dismount. Curious eyes watched them disappear within the court house.

"Bet yuh there's a nigger in the woodpile somewhere. Bet yuh that's Bill Strain's sweetheart."

"Getting hot, ain't it, Jim?"

"Bet yuh, Clown-Face. Glad it ain't me that's sweating over there in jail."

Men mopping red faces with red hand-

kerchiefs in the red heat of Blazing Rock. Smell of leather, smell of horses; and above the red brick courthouse the flag.

Nine o'clock. Nine-thirty. The courthouse doors swung wide. The crowd surged up the stone steps. A limping, oldish man with a yellowish face, that spoke of ill-health, was in charge of the door. The subdued voices of the crowd watching the bulletin-board made a low hum—quiet voices talking of the trial.

Necks craned forward expectantly as the door of the court room opened. With a white crayon the clerk of the court scrawled on the blackboard—

THE STATE vs. STRAIN
Witnesses Excluded

Shuffling of feet as the crowd filed in. Uncertain looks from some of the younger men as they wondered just where they should seat themselves. Rhythmic moving of lean, tanned jaws in a court room filled to capacity. Then an usher closed the door.

CHAPTER X

THE TRIAL

SAVE for the fact that it ignored some of the formalities usual in the more crowded centers of population, the proceedings in the District Court of Frontier County, Arizona, were much like those in other parts of the country. The back of the court room was given up to tiers of benches, where the spectators sat facing the judge, the jury box and the witness stand. Between these and the public were two oak tables, one of which was for the use of the prosecuting attorney, the other for the counsel for the defense. At a third table, which stood between those of the opposing lawyers, sat the clerk of the court, a court stenographer and a solitary newspaper reporter.

A door opened and the prosecuting attorney strode into the court room. Clad in a very long, black coat that emphasized a slight curvature of his spine, with his flaring, black

bow tie, more suitable to an artist than a lawyer, and the piercing eyes of a fanatic, set in deep caverns beneath bushy black brows, Nathan Cultus very much resembled a wicked old buzzard. Before seating himself at his table, he bowed slightly to Lawyer McQuarrie, spick and span in a light gray suit, with the corner of a white silk handkerchief just visible above the breast pocket of his tightly-buttoned coat.

A buzz of interest arose as, accompanied by Sheriff Austen, Bill Strain entered. For a moment his gaze swept the crowd, as though seeking a familiar face. Apparently disappointed, he dropped his eyes, and his lips set in a gesture that was almost defiant. At a word from the sheriff, he dropped into his seat, stonily staring at the empty jury box, and at the high dais from which the judge would preside.

Everybody arose at the entrance of District Judge Harkness, and not until he had taken his place did the spectators resume their seats, some of them wondering if such a quiet looking man, in such an ordinary business suit, really possessed the power to send a prisoner to the gallows.

A slight rustling and whispering succeeded the entrance of the judge. This was followed by a silence so intense that one could almost have heard a feather drop. Then the clerk's voice droned:

"The State of Arizona versus Bill Strain."

Nathan Cultus arose to examine the first man from the panel drawn for the jury. The prosecuting attorney rubbed his claw-like hands together, as he fixed his cavernous gaze on the face of the grizzled old-timer he was about to question.

"Name?"

"Bat Masters."

"How long have you been a resident of the State of Arizona, Mr. Masters?"

"Ever sence she has been a State, sir," replied the old man, with a friendly smile.

"And before that, Mr. Masters?" persisted Nathan Cultus. "Where did you reside before that?"

"Arizony Territory," grinned Bat Masters. "Fact is, I was born hyar, seventy-nine years ago."

A snicker arose among the crowd.

"Silence in court!"

"Have you formed any opinion as to this case?" Nathan Cultus asked Bat Masters.

"Shore I have," came the quick answer. "Bull Murdock had oughta been hung thirty years ago."

"Dismissed for cause," said the prosecuting attorney curtly; and the clerk called another name.

Listening to the incessant challenging of the opposing counsel, Bill Strain found himself wondering why the State of Arizona chose to make such a fuss over him. Surely it must cost a pile of money to pay all these men. Where did that money come from? Too ignorant of such matters to realize that the people of Arizona were, with taxes, paying the cost of the trial, in a vague way Bill imagined that the man who was footing the bills for it was old Bart Hendricks himself.

Questioning, challenging, wrangling, yangling; hour after hour it went on. Hour after hour behind closed doors the spectators sat reeking in their own heat as they awaited the verdict.

Nobody dreamed that after the first strangeness had worn off, Bill had become so

absorbed in watching the manner in which justice was administered, that for hours he forgot entirely that he was the central figure of the case.

Man after man was examined for jury duty, only to be dismissed for cause; but by five P.M. the jury was at last completed. Immediately afterward court adjourned until ten o'clock the following morning.

Promptly at ten A.M. the following day, the State called Ranger Jack Allerton first to the witness stand.

He testified that he had been riding past the pool hall, when he had heard a commotion within. Wondering what was wrong, he had been about to dismount, when a man had rushed out into the road calling for the sheriff.

"Then what did you do?" asked Nathan Cultus, rubbing together his freckled pale hands.

"I entered the pool hall," replied the ranger. "Bill Strain was astride of the body of Bull Murdock. He had hold of Murdock's hair and was beating his head against the floor. So I arrested him and turned him over to the sheriff."

"That will be all," said Nathan Cultus grimly. "You may step down."

The soda-fountain clerk was the next witness called by the prosecution. He was an oily-faced man with shifty black eyes and thick lips, answering to the name of Curt Snyder.

"I was polishing the bar—er—counter," he testified, "when in comes the accused and orders an ice-cream soda. It was a rare good one too, but I hadn't no more than set it before him, when he catches sight of Mr. Murdock and his partner a-playin' pool. He takes one look at 'em, then he flings a quarter down on the bar—er—I mean counter, and goes over and snatches a cue out of Mr. Murdock's hand and bats him over the head with it. Then I yelled for help and—"

"Thank you, Mr. Snyder," cut in Nathan Cultus. "You may step down."

Tim Blodgett, the man with whom Bull Murdock had been playing pool, substantiated the perjury of the soda clerk. Cross examination by the defense failed to shake the testimony to any material degree, and when at eleven-thirty o'clock the State rested

its case, it appeared to the spectators that there was little chance for Bill Strain to escape a prison sentence.

After a recess for lunch, at two o'clock, Justus McQuarrie presented the first witness for the defense.

With his long, thin chin resting on one claw-like freckled hand, Nathan Cultus fixed a piercing gaze on old Bart Hendricks as he took the stand, as though trying by thought transference to influence the cattleman in his replies to the questioning of the counsel for the defense.

"Your name, please?"

"Bart Hendricks," replied the old cattleman distinctly.

"What is your business, Mr. Hendricks?" The question seemed unnecessary, for everyone in the court room knew him.

"Stock raising, sir. I am the owner of the Lazy T cattle ranch."

"How long have you lived in Arizona, Mr. Hendricks?"

"Sixty-seven years."

"Are you acquainted with the defendant in this case?"

"Yes, sir, and I knew his grandfather and his father before him, Hair-Trigger Strain—"

"I object, your Honor!" cried Nathan Cultus, jumping to his feet. "Such evidence is irrelevant to the case in hand."

"Your Honor," said Justus McQuarrie, "I am only trying to show that an effort is being made to convict the defendant, because of his ancestry."

"I ob—" began Nathan Cultus and an usher shouted, "Silence in court!" as excited talk broke out among the crowd.

"Objection overruled," said the judge, and Nathan Cultus sank back in his seat, looking more like a buzzard than ever.

"Will you please tell the jury what you know about the parents of the defendant?" asked Justus McQuarrie.

"Nearly thirty years ago," stated old Bart Hendricks, "the prisoner's grandfather was lynched for murder."

"Whom did he murder?" persisted Lawyer McQuarrie.

"My brother," was the quiet reply.

One could have heard a pin drop in the court room as the witness proceeded.

"Twenty years later, the prisoner's father, Hair-Trigger Strain, shot and killed my only son."

All eyes were on Bill Strain as, leaning forward in his seat, he stared at the old cattleman who had befriended him in his hour of need. He thought he understood it all now, and a great bitterness arose in his heart and welled out of his eyes in two boyish tears that rolled slowly down his tanned cheeks. So this was justice! They were bringing all the weight of the sins of his fathers against him, in an effort to send him to the gallows. It seemed to him as though a great weight suddenly had descended upon his shoulders, as he slumped back into his seat.

Then the drone of voices was silenced again by the usher, and Lawyer McQuarrie bent forward and pointed a slender white finger at Bart Hendricks.

"Why," snapped the dudish, little attorney, "did you employ the grandson and son of two men who had done you such a terrible injury?"

Tall, thin-faced and erect, the old cattle-

man looked straight at the jury, as in his kind voice he made answer.

"Because I do not believe that a man who is trying to do right should be made to suffer for the sins of his fathers."

Nathan Cultus was on his feet then, croaking his objections—"irrelevant—sentimental bosh—I appeal—" But his voice was almost unheard in the roar that shook the crowded court. The judge had to rap twice with his gavel before his voice could be heard.

"Mr. Hendricks, you must confine yourself to answering the questions of counsel, and not deal in generalities."

"I demand that the evidence of the witness be struck from the records," shouted Nathan Cultus.

"Overruled," said the judge. "Striking it from the records would in this case do no good whatsoever. Let the witness proceed with his testimony."

But having gained his point, Justus McQuarrie was satisfied, and forebore further questioning. Not so Nathan Cultus, who hopped to his feet in a hurry to cross examine.

"In your evidence, Mr. Hendricks," purred the attorney for the State, "you admitted that men in your employ took the law into their own hands by deliberately hanging the grandfather of the prisoner without the formality of a trial. May I ask who was the leader of those men?"

"I was, sir," replied the old cattleman.

"Do you believe in lynch law, Mr. Hendricks?"

"In most cases, no," replied Bart Hendricks, "but under the conditions which prevailed in some parts of Arizona at that time, the only way to put fear into the hearts of desperados was to catch 'em in the act of committing a crime and hang 'em to the nearest tree."

Feeling somehow that he had said something detrimental to the cause of the boy he was trying to help, old Bart Hendricks obeyed the command to step down.

The most severe cross examination by the prosecution failed to shake the testimony of Hop-Toad and Odd Smith, relative to the attack upon Bill Strain by Bull Murdock on the day of his father's death. Both the cow-

boy and the foreman of the Lazy T swore to seeing a rope in the hands of Bull Murdock and to seeing him strike Bill Strain by hurling a stone at him. The fact that Bill had retaliated by knocking out the bully was so obviously in his favor, that Nathan Cultus looked rather worried as he dismissed the witnesses.

"Now," said Lawyer McQuarrie, "I will endeavor to prove that the defendant is not at all the kind of a character the attorney for the State would have the jury believe. By the testimony of one more witness, I expect to show that Bill Strain is only a boy, handicapped by a heritage of outlaw blood which is in no measure his own fault. I will try to prove that, given a chance, he may become a good citizen of the State of Arizona."

Half risen from his seat, Bill Strain stared at Lawyer McQuarrie with startled eyes. Why had he himself not been called upon to testify in his own defense? It was beyond his power to know that the little lawyer was astute enough to realize that in his ignorance Bill was more apt than not to endanger his own cause, should he be allowed to take the

stand. Who could be this last witness who was to be called to testify for him? Not Margaret Hendricks — not the girl he thought he loved! He would rather go to the gallows than see her standing before the gaze of that sensation-seeking crowd. As he agonized in his seat, displaying the first signs of nervousness he had shown, a slender, dark-haired girl entered the court room and was conducted to her place on the stand. A cold chill seemed to run up Bill's spine as Betty looked straight at him. Then he scowled.

Puzzled at the lack of friendliness in Bill's face, Betty looked intently at him for a moment; but he would not meet her eyes. Slumped forward in his seat, he stared fixedly at the floor, so he did not see the crimson flush that swept over her cheeks upward to her dark hair. Nor did he guess at the tide of misery his scowl had aroused in the girl, as cut to the heart, she wondered what wrong she had committed. But she had little time for further thought on that matter, for the voice of Lawyer McQuarrie cut the silence.

"What is your name, please?"

"Betty Lorraine, sir," replied the girl, wondering if already the little attorney had forgotten her.

"Are you acquainted with the defendant?" asked Lawyer McQuarrie.

"Yes, sir," replied Betty, letting her gaze rest a moment on Bill Strain's bowed head. "Bill Strain saved my life on the Flaming Sink. He and I ran away together, because we wanted to get a fresh start among decent law-abiding folks."

Not a sound broke the silence of the court room as, in her own way, Betty told the story of her flight with Bill Strain across the Flaming Sink.

When at last Betty was dismissed by counsel for the defense, Nathan Cultus arose to cross examine.

"Are you married, Miss Lorraine?" was the prosecuting attorney's first question.

"No, sir."

"Yet, you admit that you passed a night on the desert alone with the prisoner."

"I object, your Honor," snapped Lawyer McQuarrie, jumping to his feet. "This is a

deliberate attempt to influence the jury by casting aspersions on the characters of both Miss Lorraine and my client."

"Objection sustained," ruled the judge.

Hardly understanding what it was all about, Betty looked from judge to jury; then suddenly her face flamed and she cast aside all restraint.

"Yes, sir!" she flashed, as with arms outstretched she faced the judge. "I was alone on the desert with Bill Strain, and rather than to have seen him here, I wish we had both died."

With the last word she swayed on her feet, then, overcome by emotional excitement, she fainted.

Bill Strain's gaze followed her as she was borne from the court room, then he dropped his eyes. Of what he was thinking, none could guess, but whatever it was, it occupied his mind to the exclusion of all else, for he did not even hear when, without leaving their box, the jury returned a verdict of "Not guilty."

CHAPTER XI

BACK AT THE LAZY T

BILL came out of his fit of abstraction to find Sheriff Austen shaking him by the hand, and suddenly he became conscious of a roar of voices around him—voices raised in noisy jubilation, which not even the insistency of the usher nor the rapping of the judge's gavel could quell.

"Not guilty!" Bill caught the words at last. "Not guilty!" he heard a voice repeating, as, escorted by Sheriff Austen on one side and old Bart Hendricks on the other, with Odd Smith and Hop-Toad bringing up the rear, he was pushed through the milling crowd, out of the stuffy court room into the white sunlight that poured down on Blazing Rock.

"When old Bart put your case into the hands of Justus McQuarrie," Sheriff Austen said, "I knew you'd win out. There isn't a better lawyer in Arizona than that little

dude. Did you notice how he out-smarted Nathan Cultus at every move? Never did like that prosecuting attorney; he looks too much like an old buzzard."

"Uh, uh," grunted Bill. "I'm much obliged to you all."

"Nathan Cultus was having it pretty much his own way," opined old Bart Hendricks, "until Justus McQuarrie put Betty on the stand. It was her story that won the case. Bill ought to be proud of Betty Lorraine."

"Cowboy," said Hop-Toad, solemnly, "if yuh don't rope an' hog-tie that girl, yuh are a fool and don't know it."

From the top pocket of his vest Odd Smith took a small packet which he handed to Bill.

"Have a chaw of gum," he invited. "It'll help clear yore brain. Guess Hop-Toad and me will be ridin' now. See yuh again at the ranch."

"I don't know whether yuh will or not," said Bill. Then he turned to Bart Hendricks.

"Is my horse in town?" he asked.

"You'll find him hitched back of the courthouse," replied the cattleman. "I had him brought in in case you should need him."

"Much obliged," said Bill. "Guess I'll go ridin' for a while."

"Don't you want to talk to Betty first?" asked Bart Hendricks in surprise.

"Betty?" said Bill Strain. Passing a lean brown hand over his forehead, he seemed to be trying to remember something. Then: "Betty?" he repeated. "No, guess I'll go ridin' for a spell. Maybe I'll see her after a while."

Bart Hendricks and the two cowboys watched him stride away.

"It's too bad this had to happen," said the old cattleman. "It will harden Bill Strain."

The far-away whistle of a locomotive broke the silence which followed the old man's remark. It was the west-bound limited pulling into Blazing Rock.

"Horned toads and hummin' birds!" exclaimed Odd Smith. "Danged if that ain't my sister Lyddy's train. I'd plum' forgot she was comin' to town. How in Hell are we goin' to get her out to the ranch? Lyddy can't ride!"

"You and Hop-Toad better ride to the depot and meet her," advised old Bart Hen-

dricks. "I'll rustle a car down at the garage and drive her out to the Lazy T."

As Bart Hendricks parted from the cowboys he caught a glimpse of Bill Strain, as, riding fast, he slipped out of town into the desert that encompassed Blazing Rock.

With his wide-brimmed hat pulled low over his eyes to shield them from the glare of the sun on the sand, Bill Strain rode on and on, until the little cow-town had melted into the haze behind him and he was alone in the desert, with room to think. In a narrow strip of shade cast by an excrescence of lava rock, Bill dismounted. Throwing the reins over his horse's head he let the animal stand, then, throwing himself down, he pillowed his head on his arms and fell to musing on what the future might hold for him. Yet, in thinking of that future, he gave no thought to Betty Lorraine. His thoughts and plans—if plans they could be called—concerned himself and the granddaughter of old Bart Hendricks.

During the weeks of imprisonment which had preceded his trial and acquittal, Bill's faith in Margaret Hendricks had remained

unshaken. He had told himself that it had been beyond the girl's power to come to him in his hour of distress; that others, her grandfather, Odd Smith, or perhaps, Ranger Jack Allerton, had persuaded her to stay away. But as to the girl herself, Bill had not doubted that she was true to him; that some day she would make good the half promises she had made that she would become his wife. Why not? He had told her he would wait until he had made good in the world; that he would live down the stigma that was attached to the name of Strain.

It had seemed so easy to Bill. The very self-sufficiency of his youth had blinded him to the fact that the public is quick to condemn but slow to forgive. He had thought that a few months good behavior would make everybody forget that the taint of outlaw blood was in his veins.

Bill Strain could not understand that Margaret was not really in love with him. He was too young to know that she had merely indulged the romanticism of a nature which demanded hero-worship as a sop to its vanity. The very fact that Bill's father had been

killed in a fight with the rangers had for the time invested Bill with a glamour that had temporarily infatuated the impressionable girl, until she was suddenly confronted by the fact that Bill Strain had killed a man.

Had Bill killed Murdock in a gun-to-gun fight on the open range, the effect on Margaret Hendricks might have been different. That it had occurred in a pool room had been sufficient cause to have effectually killed Margaret's budding romance.

It would be wrong to imagine that Bill Strain thought of these things as he lay in his strip of shade. As a matter of fact his thoughts were utterly disconnected, merely the chaotic ramblings of an immature mind that had been deeply wounded. The main thing that was bothering him was whether he should return to the ranch, or whether he should ride on and on until at last he reached a place where he would be more appreciated.

It was the influence of the desert itself that at last made Bill decide to return to the Lazy T. Bill did not know that though, for the desert does things in a quiet way—a quiet, passionless way, which, none the less, is very effective in healing ragged nerves.

Through the long, lazy hours of that summer afternoon, the desert was working on Bill Strain in its silent way. Toward sunset the silence was broken by the singing of a cactus wren; then a long-eared antelope rabbit loped past, stopped, sat up and stared at the silent figure on the sand. In the very far distance a coyote began to howl at the approach of the end of day. Bill Strain stirred, sat up, arose to his feet, and gazed toward the west.

The sun was sinking into a blood-red sea beyond the Red Mountains when Bill Strain mounted his horse and rode slowly toward the ranch.

Dusk lay heavy on the desert when Bill rode up to the corrals. Barking joyously, Gringo, the black dog, ran to welcome him, but Bill hardly noticed him. After taking care of his horse he strode into the bunk house where Hop-Toad was poring over a dog-eared magazine.

"Welcome back to our li'l city, cowboy," grinned Hop-Toad. "Got a real pleasant surprise for yuh. There's a chaperone come to the Lazy T. She's a yard and a half wide

across the britchin', and don't know the difference between a cayuse and a coyote."

Odd Smith arose from his bunk and came forward to meet Bill.

"Hop-Toad," he said severely, "yuh talk too much with yore mouth. Take a chaw of gum."

"Don't pay no 'tention to that li'l darlin'," begged Hop-Toad. "He's the bow-legged li'l runt that has put the kibosh on us pore innercent cowhands. Odd Smith has brought a chaperone to the ranch."

"Huh?" said Bill Strain. He stared from the stocky little foreman to Hop-Toad. "What's that?" he asked.

"That misbeguided son of a knot tail," explained Odd Smith, "is tryin' to tell yuh that my sister, Mrs. Lydia Gaunt, has taken a position as housekeeper to Bart Hendricks."

"I'll tell the turkeys she has!" sighed Hop-Toad. "The Chink cook took one look at her, then he started to whet his butcher knife on the top of the stove. Listen, Bill, she's callin' supper now."

High pitched as the squeal of a file, a woman's voice called from the house:

"If you hired men want any supper, you'd better come and get it."

"I'll be going back to mother," sighed Hop-Toad, "when the work is done next fall."

With a vague sense of uneasiness Bill Strain followed the others to the house.

They were met on the veranda by a muscular looking woman in her late fifties. Above a face as florid as that of Odd Smith, her fiery red hair was drawn back in a smooth band that, without the least suggestion of ripple or wave, vanished beneath the base of a very tight coil at the back of her head. In one big red hand she held a broom which she offered Odd Smith as he stepped onto the veranda.

"You, Oddipus" (she pronounced it Oddipuss), "brush those men off before they come into my dining-room."

"Reck'n they'd rather do their own curryin', Lyddy," grinned the little foreman. "And say, Lyddy, let me make you acquainted with Bill Strain. Bill, meet my sister, Mrs. Lydia Gaunt."

"Pleased to meet yuh, ma'am," mumbled

Bill. "How's everything in—in—. Pleased to meet yuh, ma'am."

"You are not," said the lady ungraciously, "and you know you are not. So what's the use of saying you are? Don't answer me back. I know better." She gave him a push with a big hand. "Go on inside and eat."

The new housekeeper could cook. There was no question about that. But Bill hardly saw the big table groaning beneath its load. His thoughts were on Margaret Hendricks, who had taken her seat at her grandfather's right hand. After a moment, Bill found himself wondering whether there was significance in the fact that she had chosen to wear a filmy black gown with collar and cuffs of creamy lace, on the evening of his return to the Lazy T. Even in his extreme ignorance of such things, he sensed that such a gown would have been more suited to the beauty of Betty Lorraine.

Something seemed to clutch Bill's heart for a second as he thought of Betty, working day after day beneath the hard, cold eye of the new housekeeper. For Bill was not in the least fooled into believing that Mrs. Gaunt

had been brought to the Lazy T for any other reason than to chaperone the girls, and accordingly he hated her with all the hatred that youth keeps for a chaperone. Doubtless during his absence, the woman had endeavored to poison Margaret's mind against him; probably that was the reason the girl refused to meet his eyes when occasionally he glanced at her across the table.

After what, for the first time in his life, seemed an interminable length of time to Bill, supper came to an end. With one last glance at Margaret he left the dining-room. The black dog, Gringo, followed him as he crossed the yard in front of the house. Seating himself upon the top rail of the breaking corral, Bill rolled and lit a cigarette, and watched the tobacco smoke drift away in tenuous blue veils.

Margaret came out on the veranda after a while, and Bill's heart leaped as he noted that she had changed her dinner gown for her khaki riding suit. Dropping to the ground, he was on his way to speak to her, when he heard behind him the clatter of a horse's hoofs. Glancing over his shoulder,

he was just in time to look up into the face of Ranger Jack Allerton as he trotted past.

"Hello, Bill," greeted the ranger in passing. "Glad to see you back at the Lazy T." With his thoughts on the girl waving to him from the porch, he failed to notice that, without having returned his greeting, Bill Strain was standing still, staring after him with eyes grown dangerously hostile.

Slowly Bill turned and entered the bunk house, where Odd Smith and Hop-Toad were playing cards by the light of a lamp with a smoky chimney. Seating himself on the edge of his bunk, Bill picked a sliver of wood from the floor and began aimlessly to whittle it into shavings. Suddenly he snapped his knife shut and arose to his feet.

"Any horses in the corrals, Odd?" he asked.

"Queens are trumps!" exclaimed Odd Smith, slapping down his cards; then he faced around, for there had been a tenseness in Bill's tone which he did not like.

"What do yuh want a horse for this time in the evenin'?" he inquired.

"Yuh'd want one too," equivocated Bill,

"if you'd been afoot as long as I have. My feet are itchin' for the feel of the stirrups. Seems like I can't get enough ridin'."

"I guess you are right, son," admitted Odd. "Take my calico horse. He is in the barn. Guess I don't need to tell you not to run him to death." He strolled to the door and looked out as the sound of passing horses reached his ears. "Seems like you won't be alone," he chuckled. "Margaret and Jack Allerton are ridin' by."

"Now, I wonder," drawled Hop-Toad, from the shadows of his bunk, "if they ain't on their way to gettin' begaged?"

An angry retort trembled on Bill's lips; but he caught himself in time and pushed past Odd Smith into the star-shine.

With the wild, hot blood that was his heritage pulsing madly through his veins, Bill strode across the yard and entered the barn. From the stall where he was kept at night, in case of emergency, the calico horse whinnied, and a whimsy crossed Bill's mind that the cow-pony, too, was longing for the sweep of the night wind across his face, and the scent of the sage in his nostrils.

Skillfully Bill smoothed out the wrinkles in the blanket, before he swung the heavy stock saddle across the horse's back. The animal started nervously as a stirrup struck the partition of his stall, for he, too, had outlaw blood in his veins. With a knee braced against the horse's flank, Bill cinched tight the three-quarter rig, chiding the pony as it turned its head to nip at him, then, backing the animal out of its stall, he led it outside and swung into the saddle. As he dismounted to take down the wooden bars that kept stock from straying into the yard, he heard the ker-plunk, ker-plunk of a rocking-chair on the veranda of the Big House, and the acid tones of the new housekeeper cut the velvet silence.

"I wonder where that hired man is going to now?"

"Just a-riding," came old Bart's booming reply. "Just a-riding, ma'am, that's all."

Coyote voices greeted Bill Strain as the calico horse swung into a lope beneath the marching stars. Above the Red Mountains the sky began to glow as the moon climbed into her place, transforming the desert into a

silver plain, peopled by great dumb cacti jealously guarding their shadows.

Having relieved his feelings by a burst of speed, the calico horse slowed to a trot and then to a walk. Finding that his rider took no notice of him, he took it upon himself to follow the hoof-prints of two other horses which lately had passed that way. In the soft sand the horse's hoofs made little sound as, with the reins lying slack on his neck, he wound his way between the cacti.

Beneath the peaceful influence of the desert night, the first flush of Bill's anger against Jack Allerton wore itself away, until almost he made himself believe that he had no just cause for the jealousy, which for a time had filled him with an insane desire to kill. It was not the first time Margaret had ridden with Jack Allerton, as Bill was well aware. The thing that troubled him most was the changed attitude Margaret had displayed upon his return to the Lazy T. Not by a single word had she shown that she was glad to see him back; not a sign had she given that she wanted to talk to him alone. Why? Surely, after he had been acquitted by a jury,

she would not hold against him the fact that he had been arrested. Why, Betty hadn't done that, and she was only—

Having reached this point in his meditations, Bill straightened up in the saddle, with a jerk that caused the calico horse to leap sideways in surprise, as his own reflections were thus rudely disturbed.

Of course! Bill thought he saw it clearly at last. Some one had told Margaret Hendricks of what Betty had said in the court room. Margaret believed that he had deliberately jilted her for love of Betty Lorraine.

Just then the calico horse stumbled and Bill was recalled to his immediate surroundings. To his surprise, he saw that he had reached the foot-hills of the Red Mountains, and that his horse was descending a narrow trail on the steep side of an arroyo in which was a water-hole known as Apache Spring. Realizing that he was nearly five miles from the ranch, Bill made up his mind to let his horse drink before starting back. As they rounded the last shoulder of rock which jutted out of the foot of the trail, he heard the sound of voices.

For a moment he hesitated, then slowly he rode around the point of rock. Below him the spring lay, a pool of silver in the moonlight. At a little distance, two horses raised their heads and whinnied, but Bill did not see nor hear them, for Margaret Hendricks was seated at the edge of Apache Spring, with her head upon Jack Allerton's shoulder, and her yellow hair against his cheek.

CHAPTER XII

APACHE SPRING

STARTLED by the whinnying of the horses, Margaret raised her head and stared at the mounted figure dimly seen in the shadow of the great rock overhanging the trail.

Springing to his feet, Allerton swung the girl behind him with one hand, while with the other he reached for the automatic at his hip. It was a natural move to make in a land where often the ungodly ride at night.

"Hands up!" snapped the ranger. "I've got the drop on you."

"Yuh can put up yore gun," said Bill, quietly. "I am unarmed. Maybe it is a good thing for yuh that I am," he added.

"Why, hello, Bill," stammered Allerton, slipping his pistol back into its holster. "Congratulate me, old man. Margaret has promised to be my wife."

"Are yuh sure?" drawled the cowboy.

"Just what do you mean by that?" Allerton's tone was dangerous as he took a step forward.

"Mean?" echoed Bill looking down from the saddle. "Well, it seems to me that Odd Smith's sister is a mighty poor chaperone."

Allerton's voice trembled as he strove to hold the mastery over himself.

"You—" he choked. "You followed us!"

"I did not follow yuh," denied Bill. "My horse followed yore horses, without my noticing what he was doing, but now that I'm here, I'm going to take Margaret back to the ranch."

"That is for her to say," retorted the ranger. "How about it, Margaret?"

With her yellow hair framing her fair features, Margaret Hendricks stood in the moonlit arroyo, staring from one to the other of her suitors, much as, ten thousand years ago, a primitive woman might have sized up a pair of young males about to war for her heart and hand. By all the rules and conventions of modern civilization she should have ignored Bill Strain, but those conven-

tions were shattered by a strange, wild feeling that came leaping across the centuries and caused her heart to pound fiercely. It was her heritage of outlaw blood bequeathed her by a line of long forgotten ancestors, some of whom had been vikings—sea wolves of the North.

A coyote howled. A rock rolled down the steep side of the arroyo and broke the silver mirror of Apache Spring.

"Margaret!" exclaimed the ranger, as he saw her expression. "Afraid of a cowhand?" She might have been a pretty yellow cat, as she looked from Allerton to Bill Strain.

Allerton gripped her shoulder. He did not hurt her, but she chose to scream. Instantly Bill Strain leaped from his saddle and with doubled fist smashed the ranger on the mouth.

With a trickle of blood staining his lips, Allerton backed away. Then he unbuckled his belt and threw it with its holstered gun to the ground. He did not look at the girl.

"All right," he said, in a voice which was little more than a whisper, "you've asked for it, Bill. Now come and get it."

When Allerton's brother, the mining engineer in Mariposa, had taught Bill Strain the rudiments of boxing, little had he imagined such a scene as took place that night at Apache Spring, where the moonlight danced with the shadows of two men, as warily they circled each other seeking an opening. Leaning against her horse, with the fingers of one hand twisted in its mane, Margaret Hendricks watched them, her eyes flashing with excitement. Unknowingly she bit her lips until blood trickled down her chin.

The ranger was not so tall as his adversary by six inches, but what he lacked in height he made up in breadth of shoulder. The muscles of his arms coiled and rippled beneath the olive drab of his shirt, as he feinted with his left for Bill's stomach, and drove his right to the cowboy's mouth.

"How's that?" he grinned. Following up his advantage, he knocked Bill head over heels with a left hook to the jaw.

Leaping to his feet the cowboy came back at him with a volley of left jabs that fairly chopped Allerton's face to pieces. Then,

stung to frenzy, they forgot to box, and standing toe to toe, swapped wallops until from sheer weakness they fell into a clinch.

Releasing their holds, they faced each other again; two men with bruised and bleeding faces crouching in the silver moonlight.

Again the fighters circled; then, seeing an opening, Bill stepped in and drove a hard right to the ranger's heart.

Allerton staggered and, feinting with his left for the stomach, Bill Strain swung a right uppercut which landed full on the point of his enemy's jaw and crashed the ranger into darkness.

Standing above the man he had whipped, Bill Strain looked down at him. Then he picked up his hat, filled it with water from the spring and dashed it into Allerton's face. The fallen man stirred, sat up and stared dazedly at his conqueror.

Across a patch of moonlight, Margaret Hendricks came to meet Bill Strain. Her eyes blazing with the light of conquest, she stretched forth both arms.

"Come," she whispered. "Let's go home."

In silence Bill looked at her, thinking of

her only as a heartless flirt who had played with the affections of two men.

A whispering little breeze laid cool fingertips on Bill's bruised face, but he did not feel it; nor did he see the silver glory of the night. Like one in a trance, he stared at the yellow-haired girl who stood with outstretched, inviting arms, all unknowing and uncaring that she had shattered his first dream of love.

And while they stood there in the silver moonlight, six armed men stole down into the arroyo. From shadow to shadow they crept until they had completely surrounded Jack Allerton, Bill Strain and the girl for whom they had fought.

From the shadows a man strode forward; a tall, red-haired man with a flaring mustache. Over the muzzles of two large calibered revolvers he spoke sharply.

"Reach for the stars."

It was Mike Shanan.

So complete was the surprise that for a moment Bill Strain could only stare. Then, slowly he raised his hands above his head, as more armed men strode from among the shadowed rocks.

Staggering to his feet, Jack Allerton, too, raised his hands, but Margaret's right hand flashed to her belt, came up, and a streak of orange flame spurted from the muzzle of a small calibered revolver.

Struck between the eyes by a bullet, a desperado, standing at the side of Shanan, threw up his arms, whirled half around in his tracks, then fell backward and lay still.

Before Margaret could fire again, Shanan wrested the revolver out of her hand, and two men caught her by the arms and twisted them behind her back.

"Cowards!" she stormed, with blazing eyes. "You dirty cowards!"

"That's as may be," said Shanan, with a glance at the slain man, "but that shot yuh fired will cost Bart Hendricks just ten thousand dollars."

"I'll die before I let my grandad pay you that much money!" blazed the girl.

"That ain't unlikely either," retorted Shanan, "if ol' Bart Hendricks don't come across with the ransom."

Maddened by the cruel threat to the girl he loved, Allerton dropped his hands and lunged at Shanan.

"You coward!" he shouted, "I'll—"

At a word from Shanan, two men jerked him backward in spite of his terrific struggles, while Bill Strain looked on apparently unmoved.

"Why in the devil didn't you come to my help?" shouted Allerton. "What kind of a man are you, anyway, to stand there and hear a gang of cutthroats threaten a defenseless girl?"

Struck by a sudden thought, the ranger stared at Bill Strain with suspicion; then he turned to the outlaw leader.

"Who told you that Miss Hendricks would be riding out here to-night?"

For a moment Shanan did not catch what Allerton was driving at; then, as the full meaning of the ranger's question broke upon him, a tigerish expression crept into his eyes. Here at last, in a most unexpected way, he saw a chance to even up an old score. Ignoring the fact that the gang had only come to Apache Spring with the intention of watering their horses, he answered Allerton's question with two words: "Bill Strain."

Silence then, with the cattle rustlers cast-

ing furtive glances of astonishment at each other; silence, while the terrific accusation sank slowly into Bill's brain, numbing his reasoning powers, so that for a full minute he could only stare. When at last he spoke, his voice was quiet, so quiet that every man but Shanan shivered.

"For that," said Bill Strain, "I'll kill yuh."

"No yuh won't, Bill," grinned Shanan, "not so long as I am yore mother's brother."

"Kin of mine or no kin of mine," said Bill Strain, "some day I'll kill yuh with my bare hands."

Shanan laughed hoarsely, then from his pocket he drew a notebook and pencil. Seating himself on a rock, by the light of the moon he wrote a few lines, tore out the sheet and read aloud that which he had written.

BART HENDRICKS:

Unless you deliver ten thousand dollars in currency to a messenger who will call on you within thirty days, 'tain't likely you'll see your granddaughter again.

MIKE SHANAN.

A growl of approval greeted the reading of the note; then Shanan raised a hand for silence.

"Two of yuh take the ranger's rifle and automatic," he ordered, "then give him his horse and escort him until yuh come in sight of the Lazy T Ranch. He is the man who is going to deliver this message to old Bart Hendricks. The rest of us will take care of Miss Hendricks."

Knowing that it would be useless to protest, Jack Allerton took the note Shanan handed him, and then he turned to the girl.

"Sorry I got you into this mess," he said, "but you'd better go with them quietly. Don't worry, I'll get a posse together and we'll have you back at the ranch within twenty-four hours."

"I wouldn't try it," said Shanan dryly, "unless you want something terrible to happen to the girl."

Ignoring the threat, Allerton turned to Bill Strain.

"Bart Hendricks should have known better than to have placed his trust in a man," said the ranger, "who has outlaw blood in his veins."

Not a word did Bill say; just stared at Allerton with hard eyes from which youth had vanished. It was the girl who answered the ranger.

"I don't believe," said Margaret Hendricks, "that Bill Strain betrayed me into the hands of these outlaws."

"No use arguing about it," said Shanan. Then he gave a sharp order.

With one outlaw leading his horse and another jabbing him in the back with the muzzle of a revolver, Allerton slowly climbed the trail which led up the side of the arroyo. As he reached the top, he saw a group of saddled horses in charge of a burly man he recognized as Buck Carroll.

"Thought yuh was never comin'," growled the rustler, staring at Allerton. "Who fired that shot down to the spring?"

"The Hendricks girl," replied one of Allerton's guards. "She killed Tod Shurtz."

"The Hell yuh say!" exploded Buck Carroll. "What's Shanan goin' to do about it?"

"Aims to hold her for ten thousand bucks ransom," grinned one of the outlaws. "If

ol' Bart don't come through, Shanan says the girl won't never go back."

"Ten thousand dollars!" muttered Buck Carroll, as he watched Allerton ride away between his guards. "Ten thousand dollars! I'd be able to talk Betty Lorraine into marryin' me if I had ten thousand dollars."

CHAPTER XIII

MIKE SHANAN SHOWS HIS HAND

WITH his right hand resting upon his holstered revolver, Shanan turned to the two outlaws who were guarding the captives.

"I've got to talk to Bill Strain," he said. "If the girl gets away while I'm gone, yuh'll answer for it with yore lives."

Then he said to Bill: "Let's go. I want to talk to yuh."

Grasping Bill by one arm, the outlaw urged him ahead of him up the trail. In the shadow cast by the point of rock, he called a halt. Silently Bill looked at him, wondering what he was about to say.

"I take it," said Shanan abruptly, "that yuh want to save the life of Miss Hendricks."

Bill stared at him without replying.

Shanan began to twist one end of his flaring mustache, a sure sign that he was losing his temper.

"Being in love with her, yuh'd naturally hate to see anything happen to her, wouldn't yuh?" he persisted.

"Yuh are talking like the fool yuh are," said Bill. "Yuh are nothing but a big bluffer. Yuh ain't got guts enough to tackle a horned toad unless he was asleep, let alone harm the granddaughter of ol' Bart Hendricks."

Ignoring Bill's outburst, Shanan spoke quietly.

"Are yuh in love with the girl, or ain't yuh?"

"It is none of yore dam' business," snapped Bill.

" 'Cause if yuh are in love with her," continued Shanan, "yuh'll jump at a chance to save her life. And yuh must be in love with her or yuh wouldn't have licked that ranger. I saw the whole thing."

"Such being the case," said Bill, "it won't make no difference what I say. It seems likely, though, that I'd do most anything to get Miss Hendricks back to the ranch. Ol' Bart was pretty good to me when I didn't have a friend. Now go ahead and

say what yo're going to and quit yore ramblin' all over the range."

"Yuh are the man," said Mike Shanan, "who is going to collect the ransom from old Bart Hendricks."

Face to face, they eyed each other, as the moonlight crept around the big rock.

"Yo're crazy," said Bill at last. "Ol' Bart ain't got that much cash in the world. But if he had ten times that much it wouldn't make no difference to me. I ain't goin' to ask for a red cent."

"I happen to know that Bart Hendricks can raise that amount," said Shanan, "and yuh'll go and get it and bring it to me at a place I shall name later. Otherwise, I shall keep the girl."

Bill's eyes were savage as those of a trapped wolf, as he stared at the outlaw and calculated his chances of killing the man by a sudden attack. Guessing his thoughts, Shanan suddenly drew his revolver.

"Yes," he said, "yuh are the man to collect the ransom. I cannot trust one of my gang, for none of them cares a hoot what I do with the girl. If one of them once got

the money in his possession, that is the last I would see of him. But I can trust yuh to bring me the money, because yuh are in love with Margaret Hendricks."

Marveling at the diabolical astuteness of the man, Bill tried to see a way out, but his brain was no match for that of Mike Shanan. Too inexperienced to be able to see anything, except that he was caught in a trap from which it seemed hopeless just then to attempt escape, he made up his mind that the only thing to do was to agree to Shanan's terms, and await an opportunity to get the better of him. A bitter look crept into his eyes at the thought that, in spite of his utmost efforts and through no fault of his own, once more he had become entangled in the web of outlawry from which he had been trying so hard to escape.

"All right," he said. "I'll do it for the sake of the girl."

"Remember," Shanan warned him, "that Miss Hendricks believes yuh to be one of my men, and act accordingly. Her life is in yore hands, to say nothing of yore own; for at the first sign of treachery, I'll shoot yuh down like a dog. Now let's go back."

Arrived back at the spring, Shanan turned to Margaret Hendricks.

"Get on yore horse," he ordered. "We're going to take a little ride. No harm is going to occur to yuh so long as yuh do as yuh are told."

Making no attempt to obey, Margaret looked at the outlaw leader with flashing eyes.

"Suppose I do not choose to obey you?" she asked.

"Then," said Shanan, smoothly, "I'll order a couple of my men to set yuh in yore saddle and tie yore feet to the stirrups."

"You don't need to trouble," she said coldly. "I'd rather die than have your men lay a finger on me." Then scornfully she addressed Bill Strain.

"So," she said, "it was you, after all, who betrayed me into the hands of these men. How could you do it after the way we treated you at the ranch?"

With a sneer curling his lips, Shanan looked from the girl to Bill. Then harshly he laughed.

"It was I," he said, "who sent Bill to the

ranch to win the confidence of ol' Bart Hendricks. Like his father before him, Bill is one of my crowd and will never be nothing but a damned outlaw."

Grasping the girl by the arm, Shanan led her toward her horse. Then he spoke to two of his men.

"Yuh'll come with me and Miss Hendricks," he said. "Two of yuh others will go with Bill. The rest of yuh stay here and plant that feller Miss Hendricks shot. Take him up on the rim and cover him with rocks so's the coyotes won't get him."

To the two men who were to escort Bill Strain, the outlaw chief gave one more order, just before he followed Margaret and her guard up the rocky trail.

"Yuh'll stay here for one hour," he said, "then ride to the old hang-out and wait until I come."

In the first wan streaks of the desert dawn, between two armed men, Bill Strain rode away from Apache Spring on the calico horse he had borrowed from the foreman of the Lazy T. One of his escorts was a heavy-set, half-breed Indian who answered to the

name of Joe Valenza. The other outlaw was his old enemy, Buck Carroll.

Swiftly the dawn fled, and the sun peeped over the Red Mountains, flooding the desert with golden light. On the top of the highest limb of a giant sahuaro cactus, a dark blue desert bird burst into song. Then an antelope rabbit sprang from beneath a clump of greasewood, and loped away ahead of the riders as they rode into a dry, rocky streambed where their horses left no tracks. Mile after mile they rode, until the dry wash became a purple-walled canyon, that was dim as a great cathedral and silent save for the muted warblings of unseen birds among the rocks.

Turning to Bill Strain, Buck Carroll asked suddenly:

"How is Betty Lorraine makin' it on the Lazy T?"

Twice the rustler repeated his inquiry before Bill came out of the reverie into which he had fallen—a reverie which had no concern whatever with Betty Lorraine.

"Probably," said Bill, "she is the happiest she ever was in her life."

With the intense interest of a man who was thinking of something else, he watched a whip-tailed lizard scuttle away among the rocks.

"I heard tell," said Buck Carroll, "that it was Betty who saved yuh from going to the pen. Is that right?"

"She only told the truth," said Bill bitterly, "which is a damn sight more than some of the other witnesses did."

"Yuh don't talk as though yuh were very tickled over being acquitted," said Buck Carroll.

"I ain't," asserted Bill. "I'd better have gone to the pen than to have got into this kind of a mess."

Knowing nothing of the arrangement Shanan had made with Bill Strain, the young rustler gazed at him curiously.

"What gets me," he said, "is why Shanan didn't kill yuh when he had the chance. I've heard him say more'n once that he'd wipe out the last of the Strains."

"He probably will," said Bill, "as soon as I've turned over the ransom to him."

"Yuh mean that Shanan is going to use

yuh to collect the money for ol' Bart's girl?" asked Buck Carroll in surprise.

"That's what he says," replied Bill. "Shanan figures that he can trust me to deliver the ransom to him, because I am in love with Margaret Hendricks. Do yuh think," Bill asked sharply, "that Shanan will really harm the girl if he doesn't get the ransom?"

"Yuh don't need to fool yoreself about that," replied Buck Carroll. "There ain't nothing on earth Mike Shanan would stop at to get his own way."

As though he had found out all he wanted to know, Buck Carroll fell silent, and for another hour the riders continued their way up a canyon that gradually grew more narrow, as the high red cliffs closed in. When the passage between the cliffs had become so narrow that the horses had to progress in single file, the half-breed Indian stopped and said something to Buck Carroll in a low tone.

"Guess we'll have to blindfold yuh," said the rustler to Bill Strain. "Shanan's orders."

It was useless to protest, so Bill submitted to having a soiled red handkerchief tied around his eyes, and thus, with the half-breed riding ahead of him and Buck Carroll behind, for a long time he rode through a maze of tortuous passages, which, between stupendous walls of solid rock, threaded their way deeper and deeper into the heart of the Red Mountains.

When at last Buck Carroll called a halt and removed the handkerchief from Bill's eyes, he sat for a moment blinking in the hot yellow light of high moon. As his eyes became accustomed to the sunlight, he gazed around, marveling at what he saw.

For he was in a small, fertile valley, apparently completely encircled by high cliffs of yellow and red sandstone, which had been sculptured into terraces and dwellings by the hands of a long forgotten race.

To say that Bill was surprised would hardly be true, for from boyhood he had heard tales of the old cliff dwellings which are often found in the more remote parts of the southwest. It was more interest than surprise that caused him to sit in his saddle

staring at the first cliff dwellings he had ever seen.

At first he thought that the cliff houses were inhabited, for there were ladders leading from the floor of the valley to the first of a series of long, narrow terraces which connected the dwellings; but a second glance proved that the ladders were merely shells of dry rotted wood, and that most of the entrances to the dwellings themselves had been closed by débris falling, as the sandstone above had slowly eroded through the centuries. Assured that the cliff dwellings were merely uninhabited ruins, Bill swept the valley itself with his gaze.

Almost in the center stood a quite large structure built of chunks of sandstone and roofed with a thatch woven from the dried ribs of the giant cactus. A plume of smoke issuing from a rough chimney showed that the building was occupied. At a little distance from the house was a crude corral in the center of which stood a crooked mesquite snubbing-post, circled by the marks left by many ropes. Beyond the horse corral was an even larger one, which apparently was

used for cattle. For there were cattle in the valley, perhaps a hundred of them of all sizes, from two-month-old calves to three-year-old steers and cows. Bill thought that among them he recognized some bearing the Lazy T brand.

"Well, what do yuh think of it?" asked Buck Carroll, as he led the way toward the corrals.

Bill said he did not know what to think, and, in obedience to an order, dismounted and unsaddled.

"Guess we'll turn the horses loose to graze," said Buck Carroll to the half-breed, who grunted an indifferent assent. Then he told Bill to follow him to the house.

Through a doorway so low that he had to stoop to avoid striking his head, Bill strode into a large room with a big fireplace at one end, in which burned a sagebrush fire. In the center of the room stood a rough table, which was set with plates and cups for a number of people. The walls of the room were hung with saddles, gun belts, coiled lariats, weather-worn chaparejos and other articles dear to the hearts of men who follow the range.

Crouching over the fire, stirring something in a big iron kettle which swung from a hook set in the masonry, was a woman—a woman of about fifty, with a lined face that had once been beautiful. Around her head her graying hair was coiled in the fashion of the nineties, and her blue eyes were strangely haggard, as, holding a great iron spoon in one thin hand, without even looking up at the entrance of the three men, she stirred the stew in the great iron pot.

Bill Strain stared at her for a moment with his heart pounding in his heaving chest. Then he took one step, laid a hand on her shoulder, and spoke a word that caused her to leap to her feet. Still holding the big spoon, from which drops of soup were falling to the floor, she stared back at him, with a growing horror in her eyes, as he stretched forth his arms.

"Mother, oh, mother!"

Slowly and bitterly Isobel Strain shrank away from her only son.

"How could you do it, Bill?" she cried. "Oh, how could you betray your own father to the rangers? Go, go away from here. You are no son of mine!"

Even Buck Carroll and the half-breed felt pity in their hearts, as they stared from the suddenly white face of Bill to the anguished features of the woman who had borne him. What Buck Carroll intended to have said as he opened his mouth will never be known, for at that moment the outer door opened, and, preceded by the girl he had abducted, Mike Shanan strode into the room.

CHAPTER XIV

TREACHERY

UNAWARE that he had arrived at a climactic moment, Shanan dismissed Buck Carroll and the half-breed with an order; then he turned to Bill Strain's mother, who was staring curiously at the girl, who had sunk down on one of the benches which flanked the table.

"Isobel," said Shanan, "I want yuh to meet the granddaughter of ol' Bart Hendricks. She is going to visit with us for a while."

To Margaret the outlaw said: "This is my sister, the mother of Bill Strain."

Margaret gave a start of surprise as Shanan completed the introduction, for as Bill Strain had never mentioned his mother to her, she had taken it for granted that she was dead. Under other circumstances, the girl might have refused to recognize the wife of the outlaw who had shot down her own father; but just then she was too glad to

meet another woman to make any discriminations, and so, impulsively, she arose from her seat and, with outstretched hand, took a step forward.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Strain," she said. "I'm sure we shall be friends."

"Friends?" echoed Isobel Strain. With eyes grown suddenly hard, she looked the girl over, from the toes of her morocco riding-boots to her gray Stetson hat, from beneath which her yellow hair was attempting to escape. "Friends?" repeated the woman. "You and me friends? And you the granddaughter of old Bart Hendricks! Well, I guess not!"

Turning on her heel, she dipped her spoon into the iron pot over the fire and began to stir.

In the silence that ensued, Bill Strain found himself tapping the floor nervously with the toe of one boot; then he glanced toward the girl, but she would not look at him. Slumped forward on the bench, she stared at the floor.

"Mother," pleaded Bill Strain, "it ain't the fault of Miss Hendricks that she is here. Won't yuh treat her right?"

The spoon in the hand of Isobel Strain grated harshly against the side of the iron pot, and that was her only answer.

Leaning against the door, Mike Shanan pulled at his flaring mustache with one hand, and with hard, cold eyes watched the woman at the fire. After a moment he turned to Bill.

"Take Miss Hendricks outside and look around for a spell," he ordered. "I'll fix things up with yore mother. It ain't no use yuh trying to get away from here either," he added, "if that's what yuh are thinking about."

Obeying a curt order from Shanan, Margaret followed Bill outside. Sinking down on the edge of the rough porch, she cupped her face in her hands and gazed across the valley at the ruined cliff dwellings. For all the notice she took of Bill Strain, he might have been a thousand miles away.

At a loss what to say, Bill, too, stared straight ahead of him. A hundred yards from the house, Buck Carroll and the half-breed were seated on the top rail of a corral, smoking cigarettes and talking in low tones.

Far above the cliffs an eagle circled, questing the valley below.

"Don't take on so," begged Bill, placing a hand on the shoulder of the silent girl. "Ain't no manner of use in that. I'll get yuh out of this and take yuh back to the Lazy T."

She shrank away from him as though his touch had been poison. Then suddenly she sprang to her feet and whirled on him with her blue eyes blazing.

"Don't you touch me!" she stormed. "Don't dare ever to speak to me again! Go back to your Betty Lorraine; she's your kind. Oh, I hate you, Bill Strain; I hate you so!"

Sinking down on the edge of the porch floor, she buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

Fidgeting from foot to foot, Bill watched her. At first he was filled with pity for her helplessness, and the flashes of temper engendered by it, but after a couple of questions had brought no answer, his pity merged into a slow anger which at last found vent in speech.

"If bawling makes yuh feel any better,"

said Bill Strain, "go ahead and bawl yore head off. But yuh can believe it or not, I ain't one of Shanan's gang, and I never was. It ain't my fault that he's my uncle on my mother's side; it ain't my fault that all of my folks were bad. But it was my fault that I was blamed fool enough to think yuh were the kind of a girl I was wantin' to marry. The kind of a girl who'd help me pull myself up by my own boot-straps, and get to be respected by everybody, 'stead of being looked down upon as the son and grandson of a couple of outlaws. 'Stead of that, yuh are nothin' but a cry-baby that ain't got nerve enough to dance to music of yore own makin'."

"I don't know what you mean," sobbed the girl, half terrified at the storm she had aroused.

"Yuh do know what I mean," said Bill Strain. "If yuh hadn't gone flirtin' with that ranger, yuh wouldn't have got captured by Shanan, and I wouldn't have to go tell ol' Bart that it'll cost him ten thousand dollars to get yuh safely back on the Lazy T. What do yuh reckon ol' Bart will think of me when I tell him that?"

Slowly Margaret arose to her feet and faced him.

"If you are speaking the truth about not being one of Shanan's men," she said, "why should he have chosen you to collect the ransom?"

"Because," replied Bill, "he knows that he can trust me to bring the money to him; because he knows that I wouldn't see anything happen to a hair of yore head."

Her breath came in a little gasp at that, and with one hand she caught at a post which supported the roof of the porch. For a moment she looked into his face, then her eyes faltered and dropped before his steady gaze.

"Is it because of that that you are going to agree to Shanan's terms?" she asked.

"There's no use talking about it," said Bill Strain. "It's up to me to get yuh out of Shanan's hands."

The door opened behind them and Shanan stepped out on the porch.

"Chuck's ready," he said briefly. "Better go inside and eat." Then he raised his voice in a shout that could be heard across the valley.

Margaret Hendricks entered the house without answering and Bill followed. As he stepped across the threshold he glanced over his shoulder. One by one a half-dozen rough-looking characters were descending a ladder which led from one of the cliff dwellings into the valley.

That Mike Shanan ruled his men with an iron hand was evident as he sat at the head of the table, for not a word was spoken by anyone of the assembled outlaws, save when he requested a comrade to pass a dish. In fifteen minutes the men clumped out, but when Bill Strain arose to follow them, Shanan stopped him.

Before he made known what he was about to say, he turned to Bill's mother.

"Yuh can take Miss Hendricks into yore room, Isobel," he said. "She's wore plum' to a frazzle."

Tall and gaunt, Isobel Strain moved slowly across the room and opened an inner door. To Margaret Hendricks she spoke one word:

"Come."

As she stood aside to let the girl precede

her, she glanced over her shoulder at Shanan, and if ever there was hatred in the eyes of a woman it gleamed out of those of Isobel Strain.

In a silence which could almost be felt, Shanan rolled and lit a cigarette; then he rested both elbows on the table and, cupping his face in his big hands, looked straight at Bill Strain.

"Well," he said at last, "what do yuh think about it?"

"About what?" asked Bill.

"About everything," said Shanan. "The way I got rid of Hair-Trigger Strain and obtained control of the whole business. For though yuh don't know it, after yore father was killed, I induced yore mother to sell the old place, and I took the money. Then that half-breed Indian told about this valley, and I moved my outfit up here by night. Now I've got hold of ol' Bart Hendricks' girl and I've got hold of yuh and made it so that yuh've got to throw in with me whether yuh like it or not, for once yuh've collected that ransom and turned it over to me, there'll be a reward offered for yuh,

dead or alive. Took a smart man to engineer all that, Bill, don't yuh think?"

With hard eyes Bill Strain met the eyes that were harder than his own, and said:

"Some day, Shanan, yuh and I will fight it out man to man."

"Not until yuh've collected that ten thousand from Bart Hendricks," said Shanan. "After that I won't need yuh no more. Meanwhile, yuh can make yoreself at home in the valley. But I wouldn't try and get away, if I were yuh, unless yuh want to die sudden."

During the days that followed, Bill Strain was given the freedom of the valley; but if he had hoped to find a means of escape, he was disappointed, for apparently there was only one exit, and that was always guarded by two armed men who would not allow him to approach.

Foiled at that point, Bill turned his attention to the ancient cliff dwellings, hoping that he might discover some long forgotten trail up the cliffs which walled the valley; but if there were such a trail, it had long since been obliterated by centuries of erosion,

nor did he find any hidden tunnel which might have led to the outside world.

As for Margaret Hendricks, he only saw her at meal times. The rest of the time she kept herself in the room she shared with Bill Strain's mother. And, implacable as ever toward her son, Isobel met all his pleadings with an obstinate silence.

Shanan himself and most of his men seemed to have left the valley on another foray, for after the first day, Bill saw none of them. The only men left were the two who took turns night and day at guarding the walled exit.

Twice, once in daylight and once at night, Bill tried to creep up on the guards; but each time he was foiled by their vigilance.

Five days after Bill's arrival in the valley, the outlaw chief and his men returned; with them they brought another bunch of Lazy T cattle.

That night Shanan called Bill aside.

"Yuh and me and Miss Hendricks will go ridin' to-night," he said. "Yuh will collect the ransom from Bart Hendricks and bring it to me at a place where I shall be waiting

with the girl. If yuh do yore part I'll turn the girl loose and let her ride home; if yuh try to double-cross me, Bart will never see his granddaughter again."

From his vest pocket he took a note which he read aloud before handing it to Bill Strain.

BART HENDRICKS:

Deliver ten thousand dollars to Bill Strain, if you wish to see your granddaughter again.

MIKE SHANAN.

Bill slipped the note into his pocket without comment, but his eyes were burning with hate.

By Shanan's orders, horses were brought, and Margaret Hendricks and Bill Strain were blindfolded and assisted into their saddles.

Mounted on his black horse, heavily armed and silent, the outlaw chief led his captives out of the hidden valley. When at last he stopped and removed the blindfolds, Bill Strain saw that they were at the

mouth of the walled canyon up which he had ridden with the half-breed Indian and Buck Carroll.

Beyond them lay miles and miles of cactus-studded desert, silvery beneath the light of the moon.

"Ride straight to the Lazy T," ordered Shanan. "Get the ransom and be back here with it before dawn. And come alone if yuh love Miss Hendricks."

Without replying to the outlaw, Bill Strain turned and looked straight at Margaret.

"I'll get yuh out of this," he said simply, "if it's the last thing I do on earth."

For a moment their eyes met, and at what she saw in his face she knew that she had been mistaken in him; for no outlaw could have looked as Bill Strain looked that night. And because she knew he would save her, if saving her were possible, Margaret Hendricks' courage flamed to meet his own. Ringingly she spoke, in the face of the fate that menaced her.

"Never mind me, Bill. Bring the Lazy T boys back with you and wipe out Shanan and his band!"

With a wave of his Stetson, Bill Strain rode away. Mike Shanan laughed mockingly, but Bill did not look back.

Had he done so, he might have seen Buck Carroll sitting his horse on the summit of a ridge above Shanan and the girl. He might have seen him disappear for a time, only to appear again and, by a roundabout way, ride toward the Lazy T, where old Bart Hendricks was waiting to pay the ransom.

CHAPTER XV

THE LARIAT

THE night breeze laid cool fingers on Bill Strain's cheeks, as he rode away on his mission, but he did not feel it, nor did he see the silvery glory of the moonlit desert. As one in a trance, he sat his horse, oblivious to his surroundings, his mind concerned only with the shattering of his dream. For, even as Bill thought that Margaret Hendricks had been his first love, so did he think that she would be his last.

Crude reasoning it was of an untrained mind; yet withal, there was something pitiful in it. For in offering to marry him, because he had won his fight with Jack Allerton, Margaret had lowered herself in Bill's estimation. It was not in Bill's power to understand that a sudden rush of primitive emotions had that night overpowered the conventions, and that, for the time being, Margaret Hendricks had become once more

just a female of the human species, striving to exercise her primordial right to choose the male she desired.

Strangely enough, Bill no longer held any grudge against Jack Allerton; that had fled with his victory. He hoped now that the time would come when Allerton would win the girl he loved.

Bill was sure that he himself wanted her no longer. Never again would he look at a girl, for he told himself that Margaret Hendricks had shattered his faith in womankind.

A certain satisfaction came to him at the very thought of it. He seemed to see himself riding the ranges year after year as his hair grayed. Grave-eyed and silent, he would go his way year after year, until from Yuma to Eagle Pass men would say of him: "Yeah, that's Bill Strain. No, he never married. He rides alone."

So, taken up with thoughts of his own troubles, for a time Bill Strain forgot his errand. He was reminded of it by the barking of a dog, and then he realized that he was only a couple of miles from the Lazy T.

Two miles—a short distance for the sound of a dog's bark to carry on a quiet night.

Reining in his horse, Bill sat watching the castles he had built once more come tumbling around his ears, as sudden realization came to him of what he was about to do. He was about to return to the man who had befriended him in his hour of trouble, and rob him of ten thousand dollars.

There was no other word for it but "robbery," for Bill would not have known the meaning of "extortion," which amounts to the same thing. Yet, so far as he could see, there was no way out for him, for he was sure that if he did not return with the money, a terrible fate would befall Margaret Hendricks. Bitterly now he regretted that he had not thrown himself bodily upon Shanan and taken a chance of overpowering the outlaw chief with his bare hands. Yet, common sense told him that it would not have been fair to either himself or the girl, for, armed as he was, Shanan would have shot Bill down without the slightest mercy. No. Bill felt he had done the best he could at the time, and that now he could only

carry out his bargain with Shanan to collect the ransom.

And that the collecting of the ransom would be the grave of all his strivings to make good against the sins and crimes of his ancestors, Bill Strain knew that, too!

Would Bart Hendricks believe him if he recounted how he, too, had been kidnaped and forced into outlawry by Shanan? Bill thought not as he spoke to his horse and resumed his ride toward the Lazy T.

There was one light still burning in the ranch house when Bill rode into the yard, and his heart began to pound violently as he saw that it was shining from Bart Hendricks' room. For the first time in his life Bill Strain knew the meaning of fear.

But it was not of himself he was thinking as he dismounted and turned his horse into the corral; it was of the misery which Bart Hendricks was feeling as he sat alone in his office, waiting for news of the granddaughter who had ridden away into the night and never returned.

As Bill turned away from the corral, Gringo, the black dog, trotted up behind him

and poked a cold nose into his hand. But Bill dismissed him with a word. Then he strode into the darkened bunk house. Not yet was he ready to face Bart Hendricks. Feeling his way across the room, Bill struck a match and lit the lamp; then he glanced around.

Flat on his back in his bunk, with his mouth wide open, Hop-Toad was snoring like a damaged saxophone; in an adjacent bunk Odd Smith was curled beneath his blankets with only the top of his head visible. In the other bunks the rest of the men were sleeping heavily, too tired to have heard Bill's entrance.

For a moment Bill surveyed them, then slowly he walked over and, placing a hand on the shoulder of the foreman, shook him into wakefulness.

Muttering savagely at being disturbed, Odd Smith at last sat up, and blinking the sleep from his eyes, stared owlishly at Bill Strain. For a full minute the stocky foreman did not seem to recognize who had awakened him, then suddenly he came wide

awake and threw both legs over the edge of his bunk.

"So," he drawled, "yuh've come back."

"Yes," admitted Bill, "I've come back."

Men stirred uneasily at the sound of the voices, and Hop-Toad sat up suddenly in his bunk and, rumpling his heavy hair with his hand, stared foolishly from Odd Smith to Bill Strain.

"Great sunshine and centipedes!" he exclaimed at last. "Lookee who's here!"

Wordlessly watching Bill, Odd Smith reached up and took a package of gum from a shelf above his bunk. With his blue eyes never leaving Bill's face, automatically, the stocky foreman of the Lazy T slipped one of the gray wafers into his mouth, and the pink wrapper fluttered from his fingers to the floor.

"What have yuh done with my calico horse?" he asked.

"He's in the corral," replied Bill. "Yuh don't need to worry about him. He ain't hurt."

"I ain't worryin' about him," said Odd Smith, "but it's too bad he cannot speak.

I'd like to know where yuh and him have been since yuh left the Lazy T."

Taking the hint, Bill seated himself on the edge of Odd Smith's bunk and told his story. From the other side of the bunk house Hop-Toad watched and listened.

"I don't figger yuh'll believe me," concluded Bill, "but that's the way it happened."

"I ain't said yuh are lying," observed Odd Smith. "As a matter of fact yore story coincides pretty much with what Jack Allerton had to tell when he got back here. Lord a-mighty, how yuh did mark up his face!"

"Do yuh mean to say that Allerton does not believe that I betrayed Margaret into the hands of the outlaws?" asked Bill in surprise.

"He did at first," admitted Odd Smith, "but, on second thought, he made up his mind that yuh was just a victim of circumstances. Him and a bunch of rangers have been combing the country since yuh disappeared, but they never found hide nor hair of yuh nor the girl. But it's no use chinnin' about it; yuh better go up to the house and talk with ol' Bart himself."

"It ain't a job I've got much stomach for," admitted Bill, "but if I don't get that money back to Shanan by dawn, there's no telling what he'll do to the girl."

"An' there's no telling what'll happen to Mike Shanan if we ever get our paws on him," said Odd Smith grimly. "Wait 'til I drag on some pants and I'll go along while yuh talk to ol' Bart."

"Me, too," observed Hop-Toad. "I ain't goin' to be left out when there's a shenanigan brewing on the Lazy T."

Bart Hendricks himself answered the knock at the door. In his right hand he held a forty-five Colt, mute evidence that he had been expecting a messenger from Shanan to arrive at any moment. In the few days which had elapsed since the kidnaping of his granddaughter, the old cattleman's face had grown lined and gray, and he seemed to have aged many years.

For a moment he stood staring from face to face of his visitors, then suddenly he seemed to realize the presence of Bill Strain.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "So you've come back. What have you done with my girl?"

With the waning moon shining over his shoulder on the haggard face of the old man, Bill took Shanan's note from his pocket and without a word handed it to Bart Hendricks.

Then Odd Smith spoke.

"If yuh'll let us in yore office, Bart, we'll tell yuh what's what."

Holding the ransom note in his left hand, Bart Hendricks stepped aside to let them pass. Then he closed the door and followed, with the muzzle of his six-shooter within a few inches of Bill's back. Plainly, the old cattleman was not taking any more chances just then with the son of Hair-Trigger Strain.

Once in the office, Bart Hendricks seated himself before his desk. Motioning toward some chairs, he bade his visitors be seated. Then he read the note demanding that he pay Bill Strain the sum of ten thousand dollars. As he finished reading it, the paper fell from his fingers and lay unheeded on the floor.

"That's no more than I might have expected," said Bart Hendricks, "from the son of Hair-Trigger Strain."

"Which is no way to talk," observed Odd Smith, perched like a little red bird on the edge of his chair. "Wait until yuh've heard what Bill has to say, Bart. Give the boy a chance."

What Bill had to say did not take long, but apparently his story left the old cattleman unmoved.

"Whichever way I look at it," he said, "it was your fault. Maybe you are telling the truth; I don't know. But I do know that if you hadn't fought Jack Allerton, the chances are that Allerton and Margaret would have left Apache Spring before the arrival of Shanan and his band. Seems to me, though, that the fight was staged to keep Allerton and Margaret there until Shanan's arrival."

"Then yuh don't believe my story, Mr. Hendricks," said Bill. "Yuh think that I deliberately betrayed Margaret into Shanan's hands?"

"I don't know what to think," admitted Bart Hendricks. "But it looks at present as though you are like the rest of your family. Outlaw blood is hard to live down."

"Which ain't neither here nor there," observed Odd Smith. "The fact remains that Margaret is in Shanan's hands, and that there is no telling what will happen to her unless Bill Strain returns with the ransom by dawn."

"Do you think Shanan would really harm her?" asked Bart Hendricks.

"I don't think anything about it," replied Bill. "Mike Shanan is bad from the boots up. He will stop at nothing to gain his own ends."

From where he sat, Hop-Toad spoke for the first time.

"Shanan will stop sudden one of these days, at the end of a thirty-five-foot rope."

No one answered him. In fact it is doubtful if the others heard. Slowly Bart Hendricks pulled open a drawer of his desk and took out a package which he handed to Bill Strain.

"I have no alternative but to pay the ransom Shanan demands," said the old cattleman. "Here is ten thousand dollars in currency. Take it, and tell Shanan from me that I'll shoot him dead the first time we meet."

"Yuh are mistaken, sir," said Bill, as he took the ransom in charge. "The killing of Mike Shanan will be my job."

"We'll follow yore tracks and get him ourselves," stated Odd Smith. "The Lazy T boys will follow him plum' to the gates of Hell."

"Better wait until Margaret is safely back at the ranch," advised Bill. "From where Shanan waits he can see for miles across the desert. If he should see yuh following me, there is nothing can save Margaret."

Again Hop-Toad spoke from where he sat, with his feet on the front rung of his chair and his sharp chin resting on his knees.

"I got an extry six-shooter down at the bunk house, Bill. Yuh can borry it if yuh want."

Of the three present, Hop-Toad had been the only man who had noticed that Bill Strain was unarmed.

So unexpected was the ugly cowboy's offer, that silence met it, while in surprise Bart Hendricks looked Bill over from head to foot, and then, as though not to be out-

done in generosity by one of his own men, Bart Hendricks himself made up for the suspicions he had entertained. Quietly he picked up his own forty-five Colt and handed it to the son of Hair-Trigger Strain.

"I'm going to take a chance that you have spoken the truth to-night, Bill Strain," he said. "Take this gun and get Shanan."

Bill accepted the gun of the old cattleman and arose to his feet.

"I'll have to be goin' now," he said. "I'll either get Mike Shanan or I'll not come back."

"Yuh'll find yore own horse in the barn," remarked Odd Smith. "So I guess yuh won't need the calico horse no more."

Standing side by side, with Gringo, the black dog, between them, Odd Smith and Hop-Toad watched Bill ride away, then the stocky, red-haired foreman of the Lazy T laid a hand on the tall cowboy's shoulder.

"Soon as it gets daylight," he said, "yuh and me will pick up the trail of Bill Strain and follow him plum' to Shanan's hang-out."

Over the cigarette he was rolling with deft fingers, Hop-Toad said:

"Ol' Gringo, the black dog, is a powerful good tracker. Why not take him along? He's got a longer nose than a cowboy."

"Sometimes," said Odd Smith, "seems like there's a genuine idee in even a Hop-Toad's skull."

Little thinking that at dawn his trail would be followed by one who needed no visible tracks, Bill Strain rode fast across the desert in the darkness which precedes the dawn.

Already, far away, the coyotes were beginning their morning hymn to the yellow star, which presently would rise above the Red Mountains; already the breeze which heralds the dawn was sweeping down from the heights at the foot of which Mike Shanan waited for the ten thousand dollars ransom.

Fast Bill Strain rode, in agony lest he should have lingered too long talking things over at the Lazy T. Tied behind his saddle was a canvas bag containing ten thousand dollars in large bills; more money than he ever expected to own.

But his thoughts were not so much on the money as they were on the fact that he once

more was in possession of a gun, and that now he could meet Shanan on even terms. Not that Bill meant to murder the outlaw; no, he meant to give him a chance to draw. A chance? Not much of a chance, for Bill Strain was at that time the quickest man on the draw in that part of the southwest.

Faster Bill rode and faster still, as in the east the stars began to dim; faster he urged his horse until the gallant animal was speeding belly down to the rising sand thrown up by his churning hoofs. Onward across white alkali flats, where no living thing could grow; past them and into a regular forest of mesquite trees, with long twisty limbs flung high enough above the ground to swing a man with a rope around his neck.

And suddenly from behind one of those trees, a rope was flung with deft skill. A loop dropped over Bill Strain's neck, tightened, and dragged him from the saddle, as vainly he reached for the six-shooter at his hip.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ESCAPE

IT was Gringo, the black dog of the Lazy T, who found Bill Strain lying bound hand and foot on the desert, as sunrise was topping the Red Mountains. Trotting up to the prone man, Gringo sniffed at him anxiously, then he glanced over his shoulder and barked the news to the riders he had left half a mile behind.

All of the Lazy T boys were in the crowd, and at the head of them rode gray-haired Bart Hendricks himself. Six well-armed riders of the ranges watched grimly as the old cattleman cut the ropes which bound Bill Strain.

Bill had regained consciousness an hour before Gringo found him, but his efforts to release himself had been in vain. Now he struggled to his feet and looked Bart Hendricks in the eye.

"Well," demanded the old cattleman, "what have you got to say?"

"There ain't nothing to say," replied Bill. "Shanan has got both Margaret and the ransom. Guess I don't amount to much after all."

That it was not Shanan who had roped him, he did not know; all he could tell them was that a rope had writhed snakily out of the night and choked him into unconsciousness.

"We 'lowed something like that had happened when yore horse came back to the ranch," observed Odd Smith. "So we got busy and saddled up, and put the dog on yore trail right away. And we brought yore horse along in case we should find yuh."

One of the riders brought Bill's horse and he climbed into the saddle.

"Guess I'll have to borrow another gun from one of yuh," said Bill. "Shanan must have took mine with him when he rode away."

"I got two six-shooters an' a rifle," said a little, bow-legged Texan rider. "Yo' can take the long gun."

"Some of us ought to follow Shanan's trail," suggested Bart Hendricks, "while the rest of us put the dog on the trail left by Bill's horse when he rode away from the outlaws' valley."

"Then yuh don't think Shanan will return to the valley now that he has secured the ransom?" asked Odd Smith.

"It is hard to tell what he'll do," replied the old cattleman, "but according to my judgment we had better split up."

"The tracks of the fellow who roped Bill are headed almost south," reported Hop-Toad, who had been doing a little investigating on his own account, "and according to what Bill says the outlaws' valley is almost north of here."

For a few moments they discussed the matter from every angle they could think of. Finally, Tex and a solemn-faced Oklahoman, called Clem Hardrack, were ordered by Bart Hendricks to follow the trail of the man who had roped Bill Strain, and whom in their ignorance they supposed had been Shanan.

"If you come up with him, shoot him at

sight," was the old cattleman's last order, "but I don't think you will come up with him, for it is my opinion that by a round-about way he will ride back to his hangout in the Red Mountains."

In vain Bill pleaded to accompany the two riders who were to follow the trail of the man who had roped him in the night and stolen the ransom. Bart Hendricks would not listen.

"No," he said. "You tried it alone once, and failed. Now you'll ride in our company."

Bill flushed, for it was very plain to him that Bart Hendricks was not altogether satisfied with the story he had told about being roped and robbed of the ransom.

At a word from the old cattleman, the black dog took up the trail left by Bill when he had ridden to the Lazy T. With nose close to the ground and silent of voice, running swiftly, Gringo led the riders across the desert.

Intent on the business in hand, Gringo paid no attention at all to the quail which, with nodding topknots, scurried out of his

path, nor to the occasional jack rabbits that leaped up almost from beneath his feet and hit the high places with twelve-foot jumps. Onward, onward sped the black dog of the Lazy T, and behind him, as the sun grew hot, rode Bart Hendricks, Odd Smith, Hop-Toad and two other riders with lean, bronzed faces and the hard, keen eyes of desert kites.

It was almost noon when the riders reached the mouth of the canyon where Bill had left Margaret and Shanan. But Shanan and the girl were gone, leaving behind them the cold ashes of the campfire the outlaw had built to dispel the keen air of the night. Stuck in the ashes was a stick with a cleft top in which had been placed a scrap of paper.

Leaping from his saddle, Bart Hendricks snatched at the note and read aloud so that all might hear.

BART HENDRICKS:

Send Bill Strain up this canyon with the ransom at once, or you'll never see your granddaughter again.

MIKE SHANAN.

It was Bill who broke the amazed silence with which the riders greeted the reading of the note.

"Then it wasn't Shanan who robbed me of the ransom!" he cried. "It wasn't Shanan at all."

"It must have been he," argued Bart Hendricks. "He is just trying to get a double ransom. And, Lord help me, I can't raise another dollar!"

"Come to think of it," said Odd Smith, "maybe it wasn't Shanan at all." He knitted his brows and slipped another chew of gum into his mouth, as though to stimulate thought.

"What do you mean?" asked Bart. "Who could it have been if it was not Shanan?"

"Mind that hombre who came to the ranch tryin' to get Betty Lorraine to run away with him?" asked Odd Smith. "Well, he said then that he'd get even, 'cause I ran him off. I'll bet a month's wages against a chaw of gum that it was Buck Carroll who robbed Bill of the ransom."

"Gimme a chew of gum, Odd," begged Hop-Toad admiringly. "Maybe I'll think of something, too!"

At another time the cowboy's remark might have evoked a laugh, but the situation was too tense, and it did not even draw a smile.

"The only thing to be done," said Bill, "is for me to ride on up the canyon alone and explain things to Shanan. I have an idea that I shall find him before I go very far."

"Let's all go," said one of the cowboys, "and hang him to the nearest tree."

But Bill shook his head.

"It wouldn't be safe for Margaret, if we were all to show up," he said. "Shanan is a man who would stop at nothing."

"I think Bill is right," agreed Bart Hendricks. "Evidently Shanan is desperate enough to do anything. Bill had better go alone."

"We'll wait here," said the irrepressible Hop-Toad, "and we'll all chaw gum 'til Bill gets back."

But a sudden thought caused Bill to pale beneath his tan.

"Is Betty Lorraine at the ranch alone?" he asked.

"Mrs. Gaunt, the housekeeper, is with her, of course," replied the old cattleman.

"What if Buck Carroll should visit the ranch with the idea of forcing Betty to accompany him while we are away?" asked Bill.

"Yuh don't need to worry while my sister, Lyddy, is on the job," said Odd Smith. "She'd run Buck Carroll off with nothing but her broom."

But Bill's suggestion caused a worried frown to wrinkle the brows of Bart Hendricks.

"Odd Smith and I will wait here for Bill's return," he said. "The rest of you ride back to the Lazy T as fast as your horses will carry you."

And so it was that for the second time, Bill Strain rode up the walled canyon toward the hidden valley.

Yet this time it was not of Margaret Hendricks he was thinking. Desperate though her plight seemed to be, Bill's thoughts had returned once more to Betty Lorraine, the little, dark-eyed girl, whose life he had saved in their flight across the Flaming Sink.

How different she was from Margaret

Hendricks! How simple in her outlook on life! All she asked was to be loved and made happy. No dreams of future greatness or wealth came to disturb her soul. Daughter of Two-Gun Lorraine, an outlaw who had died before Lazy T guns, she had sense enough to know that her only happiness lay in marrying a man who himself was the son of an outlaw, thus removing all possibility of unhappiness by indulging in mutual recriminations.

Why not? Bill asked himself. He, too, was lonely, and apparently Betty was the only one who believed that he would eventually make good. Why not ask her to marry him and start life with him on a homestead somewhere upon the edge of the desert he loved? Well, if things ever straightened out and Margaret Hendricks got safely back to the Lazy T, Bill made up his mind that he would be kinder to Betty Lorraine. Meanwhile—

With head bowed in thought he was riding slowly up the canyon, when suddenly Mike Shanan stepped from behind a rock. In each hand he held a forty-five Colt.

"Up high!" he barked.

As Bill raised his hands, the outlaw stepped forward and took his six-shooter from its holster.

"Yuh can get down off yore horse," he said. "Where is the ransom?"

"Where is Miss Hendricks?" asked Bill coolly. "The bargain was that yuh would deliver her up when yuh got the money."

"She's back in the valley with yore mother takin' care of her," growled Shanan. "Where is the money?"

With pale eyes gleaming from beneath his shaggy red brows, the outlaw looked expectantly at Bill's saddle, as though he thought he would see a bag of gold tied behind the cantle.

"Speak quick," he said. "Where is the money?"

"I don't know," replied Bill quietly. "Somebody roped me last night and choked me into unconsciousness. Then he tied me up and left me on the desert and rode away with the gold."

Shanan's surprise was so great that his guns almost fell from his hands, as with

slitted eyes he stared at Bill in evident disbelief.

"What's that yuh said?" he asked fiercely.

In a few words, Bill told his story.

"If yuh think I'm lying," he concluded, "look at my neck."

As he spoke, he threw his head back so that the outlaw could see a narrow bluish line left by the tightening of the rope.

"So that was the way of it," said Shanan at last. "I might have known better than to have told that yellow-bellied reptile my plans."

For a minute he stood there, apparently thinking, then he ordered Bill to mount his horse.

"Where are yuh going to take me to?" asked Bill.

"Back to the valley," snapped Shanan, "an' I'm going to hold yuh and the girl there until I get the feller that roped yuh. After that yuh can take the girl and go back to the Lazy T—if they still want yuh."

"Meaning?" asked Bill.

"Meaning," said Shanan, "that meanwhile I'm going to get word to Bart Hen-

dricks that the whole thing was a plant, and that it was yuh who stole the ten thousand dollars."

"Yuh can't make the Lazy T boys believe that!" exclaimed Bill, as the diabolical plot became clear to him.

"Why not?" asked Shanan. "Ol' Bart is about prime to believe anything he hears about the son of Hair-Trigger Strain. I've an idea that the next time the Lazy T boys get hold of yuh, yuh won't get away from 'em alive."

"If yuh are so anxious to get rid of me permanent, why don't yuh finish the job now?" asked Bill.

"I would," replied Shanan, "but for two things. The first is that I don't altogether believe that story about the way yuh lost the ransom, and second is that, if it is true, I got a notion yuh were in cahoots with the feller that roped yuh. I ain't trusting the son of Hair-Trigger Strain."

As though he had said all he intended to, he ordered Bill to ride up the canyon ahead of him.

"And don't try any funny work," he added, "or I'll plug yuh in the back."

Helpless under the menace of the outlaw's guns, Bill rode slowly ahead, until Shanan ordered him to stop and be blindfolded.

When Shanan at last removed the blindfold, Bill saw that once more he was a prisoner in the hidden valley, the whereabouts of which had been revealed to the outlaw leader by Valenza, the half-breed Apache.

"Welcome home," leered Shanan. "Nobody will ever find yuh here."

Without another word he strode toward the house, leaving Bill to unsaddle his horse and turn him loose to graze with the rustled cattle that dotted the little valley.

Having nothing else to do, Bill seated himself upon the top rail of the corral fence and rolled and lit a cigarette, watching the blue smoke with desperate, hopeless eyes.

How to get out of his predicament for the life of him he could not see. All he could do was to await developments and watch his chance to escape.

Not a soul was in sight. If the outlaw band was in the valley, it seemed that the men must have retired to the cliff dwellings to laze away the hours until Shanan should

call them together for another raid. Yet it soon became evident that Bill's arrival had been noted, for as he gazed around he saw a man with a rifle in the crook of his arm sitting on a boulder at the mouth of the exit to the valley. He was more than two hundred yards away, but by the red turban around his head, Bill recognized the guard as Valenza, the half-breed Apache.

Tired of inaction, and thinking that he might possibly glean a little information from the taciturn breed, Bill dropped off the fence. Then he stood stock-still, for, savage with triumph, echoing from wall to wall of the valley, came the bark of the black dog of the Lazy T.

From where he stood, Bill saw the breed guard spring to his feet, whip his rifle to his shoulder and fire twice at Gringo, as, nose down, he trotted into the valley. Then another shot rang out, and, still clutching his rifle, the Indian leaped high in the air and fell sprawled out among the rocks.

Riding into the valley with a revolver in each hand came Odd Smith and Bart Hendricks of the Lazy T.

Missed by the bullets fired by the breed, Gringo ran up to Bill with wagging tail, as though proud that he had tracked Mike Shanan to his lair. But Bill had no eyes for the dog.

"Better take cover," he yelled to Bart Hendricks and Odd Smith. "Shanan himself is in the house, and the rest of the gang are hiding out in the cliff dwellings across the valley."

But the old cattleman was too full of thoughts of his granddaughter to pay any attention. Followed by Odd Smith, at top speed he rode toward the house, threw himself from the saddle and, with a revolver in each hand, burst open the door. Not to be left behind, Bill sprinted forward and was right at the heels of Odd Smith as he entered the outlaws' hang-out. And there he stopped in utter astonishment.

For Bart Hendricks was just coming out of the room Margaret had occupied with the mother of Bill Strain. The old cattleman's face was filled with fury he made no effort to conceal.

"Gone!" he exclaimed. "The house is empty."

"Gone?" echoed Bill. "Shanan cannot be gone. With my own eyes I saw him enter this house not half an hour ago."

"Just the same, he is gone now," asserted Bart Hendricks, "and he has taken Margaret with him. The house is empty."

Silence then for a moment. Slowly Odd Smith unwrapped a wafer of gum and popped it into his mouth, moving his jaws with a sideways motion like a sad and thoughtful sheep.

"Gone," he said. "Gone like a rat when he hears a weasel coming. We'd ought to have known Shanan was too smart to let himself be trapped so easy. There must be another way out of the valley."

Then, for the first time since they had met, Bill Strain heard old Bart Hendricks swear. Short, terrible words, concerning the character of Mike Shanan.

"Yes, the rat is gone," concluded Bart Hendricks, "but he has left his nest behind him."

Turning to Odd Smith, the old cattleman asked for a match.

"Goin' to burn him out?" asked the little foreman.

The rancher's answer was to stride into an adjoining room and touch the flame of the match to the mattress of Shanan's bed. Like an angry yellow snake a tongue of flame leaped upward to the ceiling.

So swiftly did the flames spread that the three men hardly had time to vacate the house. Standing outside, they watched a cloud of black smoke pour through the roof. It was followed by short stabs of flame. Then suddenly the roof fell in a huge shower of sparks which shot skyward in pursuit of the smoke that was fast rising above the red rock walls of the valley.

"Wonder how Shanan will like that?" said Odd Smith, as, with his blue eyes, he squinted upward. Then suddenly he raised his hand.

"Look!" he shouted. "There he is!"

As Bart Hendricks and Bill gazed upward to where Odd Smith was pointing, their hearts turned to ice in their breasts. For on top of the cliff Mike Shanan stood between two women. Outlined against the sky, his gigantic figure appeared twice its natural size, as with one hand on the shoul-

der of Bill Strain's mother and the other grasping Margaret Hendricks, he slowly pushed them toward the brink of the precipice, which dropped a thousand feet to the feet of the watching men.

CHAPTER XVII

FOILED

WITH horror in their eyes, Bart Hendricks, Odd Smith and Bill Strain stood gazing upward at the top of the cliff over which Mike Shanan was shoving the women to their death. There was nothing the watchers could do; not a single thing, for already it seemed that another foot would send the women to their doom. For one brief instant it occurred to Bart Hendricks that a well placed rifle bullet might kill Shanan in time to thwart his dastardly intent; but second thought convinced him that, before a rifle could be fired, the outlaw would have accomplished his fell purpose.

That Shanan had no intention of actually pushing the women over the cliff did not occur to any of the watching three; that by a ruse he had succeeded in drawing their attention away from everything else, they did

not imagine, until suddenly behind them came the curt command:

"Hands up, all three of yuh!"

Taken at a disadvantage as they were, there was nothing they could do but obey, and with their gaze still fixed on the figures outlined against the sky, Bart Hendricks, Odd Smith and Bill Strain raised their hands above their heads.

As they did so, Shanan's mocking laugh floated down from the top of the cliff, and they saw him draw the women back from its edge.

Behind the Lazy T men a man spoke sharply.

"Keep yore hands up."

A moment later, they were disarmed and told to turn around.

Before them stood a dozen desperate looking characters with leveled revolvers. Scanning the faces, neither Bart Hendricks nor Odd Smith could remember ever having laid eyes on any of the outlaws before.

"Yuh can lower yore hands now," said a black-whiskered brute with a pockmarked face. "But don't try no funny work onless yuh aim to get plugged."

How it happened that Gringo, the black dog, had not given warning of the outlaws' approach was explained when he was seen coming from among the rocks with a quail in his jaws. Being only a dog, with a long run behind him, he had given way to a desire to satisfy his hunger.

But at the sight of the outlaws, he forgot his appetite. Dropping the quail, he started forward, barking vociferous anger.

With an oath, one of the men raised his gun, but before he could fire, Bart Hendricks spoke sharply to the dog.

"Go home!"

From puppyhood the black dog had been trained to obey without hesitation, so now, with one last glance at the quail he had dropped, he whirled and sped down the valley, back to the Lazy T Ranch.

Twice an outlaw's revolver spat forth a bullet at the fleeing dog, but, unharmed, he vanished between the grim red walls of the exit to the valley.

"Dogs are trumps," remarked Odd Smith. "An' there'll be Hell a-poppin' when Gringo gets back to the Lazy T."

"There'll be Hell poppin' before that, dang yuh," snarled the outlaw, who seemed to be Shanan's right-hand man. "Jest yuh wait until Shanan gets here."

They had not long to wait, though by what means Shanan contrived to reach the valley so quickly they could not guess. But suddenly he appeared before them, alone and afoot. Pulling at an end of his sweeping red mustache, he strode up to Bart Hendricks, and stood looking at him with steely eyes.

"Well," he drawled, "this shore is an unexpected pleasure."

"You yellow hound!" blurted out the old cattleman. "What have you done with my girl?"

"Yuh'd have her back on the ranch with yuh now, if yuh hadn't tried to double-cross me," snarled Shanan. "Thought yuh could get away with sending Bill Strain in here with a yarn that he'd been tied up and robbed of the ten thousand dollars ransom, did yuh? Well, yore pretty plot fell through, Bart. Now it'll cost yuh fifty thousand dollars to get back alive to the Lazy T."

"You fool!" cried the exasperated cattleman. "I haven't that amount of money in the world, and I can't raise it."

"Maybe not," grinned the outlaw, "but yuh have friends who'd hate to see yuh hung, to say nothing of that girl of yores."

Maddened at the insult to the granddaughter of the man who had befriended him in his hour of trouble, Bill Strain forgot all caution. With the cry of a desperate animal at bay, he hurled his hundred and eighty pounds straight at Mike Shanan.

His clutching fingers were almost at Shanan's throat, when the outlaw sidestepped. Raising his arm, he brought the barrel of a forty-five Colt crashing down on Bill's head.

"There's no fool like a young fool," he snarled. "Guess he'll know better next time than to try to come to grips with Mike Shanan."

Then he turned to his men and bade them disperse until he should call them.

"An' when I do," he said, "I'll need every last man of yuh to help me make one last big clean-up before we cross the Mexican border."

Kicking Bill in the ribs, Shanan aroused him to consciousness and watched him stagger to his feet and stand dizzily swaying. Then, driving his three captives ahead of him, the outlaw forced them to cross the valley.

At the foot of the cliff, on the opposite side to the ashes of the house Bart Hendricks had burned, they came to a ladder. Menaced by Shanan's revolver, they ascended the ladder to a narrow ledge hewn out of the face of the cliff by the hands of the long dead race which had made the valley its home.

Reaching the end of the ledge, they turned at right angles into a passageway which led into a large chamber hewn out of the soft sandstone. In that room, once occupied by cliff dwellers, they found Bill Strain's mother keeping guard over Margaret Hendricks.

Seated on the floor with her back against the wall and her head in her hands, the girl glanced up listlessly. Then, as she saw her grandfather, she sprang to her feet and flung herself into his arms.

"There, there, li'l girl," said old Bart

soothingly. "We'll get you out of here before long."

"Maybe yuh will, and again, maybe yuh won't," said Shanan. "That all depends."

"Tell me what you want me to do," said Bart Hendricks, "and I'll do it."

"What I want yuh to do," said Shanan, "is to write and sign a note to the mayor of Blazing Rock demanding that the town raise fifty thousand dollars in cash, and have it delivered to me, personally, within twenty-four hours after he receives the note. If the money is not forthcoming at the appointed time, I'll leave yuh and Odd Smith hanging from a tree in front of yore own door, and I'll carry yore girl across the Mexican border, and marry her when I get good and ready."

"You unutterable fiend!" groaned Bart Hendricks. "Your terms are impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," retorted Shanan, "if a man really makes up his mind to do it."

While Shanan had been talking, Isobel Strain had listened in silence. Now she fixed her piercing black eyes on his face.

"You can do as you like about Bart Hen-

dricks and Odd Smith," she said, "but you shan't harm the girl."

"Seems like yuh've fallen in love with her mighty sudden," sneered Shanan. "How come?"

"Because," replied Bill Strain's mother, "Margaret Hendricks has opened my eyes to the truth. It was not Bill who wrote the note that betrayed Hair-Trigger Strain into the hands of the rangers. It was you. If you were not my own brother, I'd kill you."

In the silence that ensued, Bill Strain spoke.

"That is the truth, mother," he said. "I never could see how yuh could think that I could betray my own dad, even though he was an outlaw."

Angered at the woman's defiance, Shanan stepped toward her as though to strike her down. But he never reached her.

For, seizing his opportunity, Bill flung himself at the outlaw, and clutched him around the knees. Before Shanan could do more than fire blindly at his adversary, Bill had hurled him to the floor. The next instant Shanan lay flat on his back with Bart Hen-

dricks and Bill holding him down as he mouthed virulent curses.

"Look out for the woman!" yelled Odd Smith, suddenly.

For, seeing her brother's peril, Isobel Strain had stooped and picked up his fallen gun. She was in the act of aiming at Bart Hendricks, when Odd Smith wrested it from her.

"I'd hate to shoot a woman," said the little foreman of the Lazy T. "But just for safety's sake, yuh'd better raise yore hands."

Then, gun in hand, he turned and covered Mike Shanan, for, attracted by the shot Shanan had fired, two other outlaws were standing in the entrance to the room, covering the Lazy T men with the muzzles of their guns.

"Drop them guns," snapped Odd Smith, "or I'll blow the top off of Mike Shanan's head."

Cornered at last and in imminent danger of losing his life, Shanan lost his braggadocio. Lacking even the courage of a rat, he seemed to shrink, as, pinned down by Bill Strain and Bart Hendricks, he stared into the muzzle of Odd Smith's gun.

"Tell those fellows to throw their guns in here," ordered Odd Smith.

As Shanan hesitated he heard the click of the hammer of Odd Smith's forty-five as he brought it to full cock. Quickly the outlaw leader spoke to the two men standing in the entrance.

As the guns clattered to the floor, the outlaws turned to go, but they stopped as Odd Smith spoke again.

"Stand right where yuh are, hombres."

Then he turned to Bill Strain and Bart Hendricks.

"Yuh can let Shanan up now; and yuh, Bill, pick up them guns and cover those two hombres in the doorway."

With Shanan and his two men covered by the muzzles of three guns, and Isobel Strain glaring defiance, Odd Smith turned to the woman.

"Yuh go tell the rest of the bunch," he said, "that we've got Shanan and two men prisoners and that we aim to take 'em out of the valley and hand 'em over to the sheriff at Blazing Rock. Yuh can tell the gang, too, that if they try to stop us the first thing we'll

do will be to send the soul of Mike Shanan to Hell."

Waiting until Isobel Strain had had time to deliver her message, the three Lazy T men herded the outlaws out into the valley.

Not a soul was in sight. Apparently, with the capture of their chief, the rest of the outlaws had decided to make themselves scarce and leave him to his fate.

Bitterly Shanan glared around at the walls of the valley which so long had been his stronghold. Savagely he addressed Bart Hendricks.

"Yuh got the whip-hand this time, damn yuh; but I ain't hung yet. And I won't be as long as the mother of Bill Strain lives. My own sister ain't going to see me hung."

"No," agreed Odd Smith, "Arizona won't allow yore sister to witness it, but yuh'll dance at the end of a rope jest the same."

While Bart Hendricks and the little foreman guarded the prisoners, Bill went and caught his own and the other two horses, which, still saddled, had wandered some distance up the valley. He also caught and

saddled the big black horse of Mike Shanan, which he found in a corral adjacent to the burned ruins of the house. Finding some spare ropes hanging on the fence of the corral, he brought them with him for the purpose of tying up the captive outlaws. Shanan's eyes gleamed fiercely as he saw his horse.

"Seems like yuh ain't above horse stealin'," he growled at Bill. "But then, that might be expected from the son of Hair-Trigger Strain."

"At any rate," snapped Bill, "the son of Hair-Trigger Strain don't make war on defenseless women."

If Shanan had expected to be allowed to ride his horse, he was disappointed, for Bart Hendricks suggested that Bill ride the black and turn his own horse over to Margaret, as being more gentle.

Odd Smith bound the wrists of Shanan and his two men. Then Shanan was tied by one wrist to one of Bart Hendricks' stirrups, while one of the other outlaws was tied to the stirrup of Bill Strain's horse and the other to that of Odd Smith.

Silent, and half afraid of the captive outlaws, Margaret tried to close her ears to the threats they voiced. So vile did their language at last become that Odd Smith threatened to gag them. And then they subsided.

When they reached the walled canyon which led out of the valley, they saw that the body of the breed guard had been removed; but nobody offered to bar their way, as, with Bart Hendricks in the lead, they passed between the grim, red walls that towered upward for a thousand feet. Evidently the remaining outlaws had either fled or were biding their time to attempt a rescue.

Behind Bart Hendricks rode Margaret; behind her Bill Strain on Shanan's black horse; and last of all Odd Smith with the third outlaw tied to his stirrup. The order of the march had been suggested by Bart Hendricks himself, seemingly with the idea of keeping Bill Strain in such a position that he could not attempt any treachery, even if so inclined.

Not that Bill had the slightest idea of treachery, but Bart and Odd Smith still

doubted him, and not until he had proved beyond dispute that he was on the square, did they intend to relax their vigilance.

That it had been Bill who had made the capture of Shanan possible seemed to have been forgotten by both Bart Hendricks and Odd Smith. At least they had not mentioned it. Yet Bill felt that the real credit was due him, and that it was only through fortuitous circumstances that later it had been Odd Smith who had assumed the leadership.

Anyway, what did it matter who had done it? The main thing was that Shanan and two of his men were now prisoners, who, if not condemned to death for their many crimes, would at least be sent to the penitentiary for a long term of years. Bill shuddered at the memory of how narrowly he himself had been saved from serving a term behind prison walls. Saved, mainly, through the evidence submitted by Betty Lorraine. Betty, whose love he had scorned for the flashing smiles and coquetries of Bart Hendricks' granddaughter.

If Bill had ever felt any love for Margaret Hendricks it had died the night he

fought with Ranger Jack Allerton. And Bill knew that that love could never be revived, for he had come to realize that Margaret was not suited to him, who loved the desert so well. She was not the type of girl who would be satisfied with living quietly and rearing children for the son of Hair-Trigger Strain.

Looking at things from his own point of view, Bill Strain could not realize that, in both Margaret's case and his own, they were merely reacting to the influence of the environment which had hedged them in since childhood. Margaret had been sheltered all her life; Bill had been strictly a product of the desert, with all of the desert's love of freedom and scorn of conventionality.

Bill Strain of the desert and Betty Lorraine of the desert. These were two of a kind! Queer he should ever have thought of marrying Margaret Hendricks. He might have known that oil and water will not mix.

Some such thoughts as these kept coursing through Bill's mind as slowly he rode behind Margaret Hendricks down the canyon which led from Shanan's valley to the cac-

tus-studded vastnesses of the desert he loved.

Never had the desert seemed as beautiful to Bill Strain as it did that day, for as far as he could see his troubles were almost at an end. With Shanan in the hands of the law, no doubt the rest of the outlaws would disband and leave the country free of their presence. And with the menace of the outlaws removed, peace would descend on the Lazy T Ranch. There would be long days of riding the sunshiny ranges, and nights when, in company with Betty Lorraine, he would attend the dances at Blazing Rock, later to ride home beside her across the desert he loved, beneath the big white desert moon. Meanwhile—

A shout from Bart Hendricks roused him from his day-dreams and he raised his head. Far away a cloud of dust was gradually coming closer; soon they saw it was made by a number of horsemen who were riding rapidly toward them.

Shanan and the other two outlaws saw the approaching riders and joyous oaths broke from their lips.

"I knew the boys wouldn't leave me in

the lurch," growled the outlaw leader. "Better put up them guns, Bart. 'Twon't do yuh no good to plug us, for the rest of the boys will get yuh and that gal of yores. Yuh can't afford to kill us. Think of yore girl, Bart. Put up them guns, if yuh value her life."

But the old cattleman did not obey. With his forty-five held ready to shoot at an instant's notice, he was leaning forward in his saddle, gazing intently at the approaching riders. Suddenly he slipped his revolver back into its holster and looked down at the man tied to his stirrup.

"You lose, Shanan," said Bart Hendricks, quietly. "Those are not your men. It is a posse of cowboys and rangers headed by Sheriff Austen."

Thunder of hoofs that came to a sliding stop as the posse drew up. Leaping from his saddle, the burly sheriff stepped forward with outstretched hand, while Jack Allerton rode toward Margaret Hendricks.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the young ranger. "You are safe."

"Couple of rangers saw smoke rising from

the Red Mountains," explained the sheriff, "an' from the top of a high cliff they saw a house burning in a walled-in valley of which they had no previous knowledge. Then they saw you three captured by Shanan's gang. So they rode into Blazing Rock and we organized a posse. And here we are. But how in the eternal did you ever get out of it and capture Mike Shanan and these two men?"

Odd Smith looked down from his saddle. Quietly he spoke.

"You can lay the capture of Shanan to Bill Strain," he said. "Me and ol' Bart jest happened along."

"That so?" asked the sheriff. "Well, sir, do you know that doesn't exactly surprise me. I always had an idee that Bill would make good."

Turning to his men, he ordered them to cover the outlaws with their guns; then, from his saddle-bag, he took three pairs of handcuffs.

Surrounded by armed riders on all sides, and handcuffed together, Mike Shanan and the other two outlaws sullenly obeyed the sheriff's order to march.

Behind them, Ranger Jack Allerton rode beside the horse of Margaret Hendricks. With bowed head the girl seemed to be listening intently to what he had to say. Presently Bill Strain saw her reach out and clasp Allerton's hand.

Slowly Bill let his horse drop behind until he was nearly three hundred yards to the rear of Margaret and Allerton. Gradually the distance between Bill and the cavalcade increased until it was almost out of sight.

Then, suddenly, Bill saw a rider leave the others. A little later, Odd Smith loped up, turned his horse, and took a place at Bill's side.

"Thought maybe yuh'd be gettin' lonesome ridin' all by yoreself," he said.

Bitter understanding was in Bill's eyes as he looked straight at Odd Smith.

"Sheriff's orders?" he asked shortly.

"Have a chaw of gum," invited Odd Smith. "It'll help yuh to keep from thinkin'."

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE'S A-CALLIN' YORE NAME

SMOKE was pouring from the chimney of the kitchen, when, just before sunset, the posse reached the Lazy T Ranch. Mrs. Gaunt, the housekeeper, came out on the porch and stood watching, as Sheriff Austen placed a guard over the three prisoners. She seemed particularly interested in the appearance of Shanan himself, perhaps because his hair was more vividly red than her own.

"Who is that?" she wanted to know. "I mean the tall man with the beautiful drooping mustache."

"Sheriff Austen," replied Bart Hendricks. For the sheriff, too, wore a mustache of good dimensions, but his was gray.

"I don't mean him," snorted Mrs. Gaunt. "I mean the one with hair the color of mine."

"That," replied Bart Hendricks, "is Mike Shanan, the most desperate outlaw this section has ever known."

"Well," said Mrs. Gaunt decisively, "outlaw he may be; but for all that, he's the only good-looking man I've seen since I came to work on this farm. Mr. Shanan is the living picture of what Gaunt was before he joined the angels."

Then she saw Margaret, who, leaning on the arm of Jack Allerton, was coming toward the house.

"Lord have mercy on us!" exclaimed the housekeeper, hurrying forward. "If that girl don't look all tuckered out, my name isn't Lydia Gaunt."

Taking Margaret in charge, she entered the house, calling back over her shoulder:

"Supper's been ready and waiting an hour or more. Go and wash yourselves and don't stand gawking there like a pack of fools."

"A competent woman," remarked Bart Hendricks. "Nothing seems to worry Mrs. Gaunt."

"No," said Odd Smith. "The only thing that worries Lyddy is that I won't stop chawing gum."

The two cowboys who had followed the

track of the man who had roped Bill Strain and stolen the ransom came riding in about that time, bringing news that they had lost the trail in one of the dry, rocky arroyos which were so numerous in the Red Mountains. They eagerly listened to Odd Smith's account of the capture of Shanan.

Suddenly the little Texan pointed toward the big black horse which Bill Strain had ridden in from the outlaws' valley.

"Ain't that Shanan's horse?" asked the cowboy.

"It is," admitted Bill. "Why?"

Striding across to the big black, the Texan lifted one of the animal's forefeet and examined the shoe critically.

"That seems to settle it," he said. "The feller that roped yo' an' stole the money was not Shanan. Or, if he was Shanan, he was riding another horse, for the animal whose tracks we've been following wore a number two shoe, and the big black there is shod with number threes."

Behind the house the supper gong clanged, and a few minutes later they all filed into the dining-room—all but two men,

who had been left to guard the captured outlaws.

"I'll send out some supper," said Bart Hendricks. "No use starving them, even if they are outlaws."

"None at all," agreed Sheriff Austen. "For I want to get them safely behind the bars before news leaks out that Shanan has been caught, and it will mean an all-night ride into Blazing Rock."

Evidently the housekeeper was attending to the wants of Margaret, for she was not present in the dining-room during supper. It was Betty Lorraine who waited on the table.

As she came into the room, Bill Strain noticed how different she looked since she had been under the watchful care of Mrs. Gaunt. Clad in a pink house dress, and with her dark hair rippling in waves around her forehead, quietly she performed her duties. Hard, indeed, it was for Bill to believe then that she was the daughter of the dead rustler, Two-Gun Lorraine. And in that moment he knew that his affair with Margaret Hendricks had been but a sad

mistake. He knew that the only girl he had ever loved or would ever love was Betty Lorraine.

As Bill ate he watched her, but she seemed to avoid his glances. Only once did their eyes meet, and at what she saw in Bill's face the girl's eyes dropped. She did not look toward him again. Puzzled at her attitude, Bill tried to think what he had done to offend her; not for one instant did he guess that she thought he did not want her; that it was Margaret whom he loved.

Supper at an end, Bart Hendricks invited Sheriff Austen into his office and closed the door. The rest of the men filed out. As they passed the captured outlaws, they glanced curiously at Shanan; but no man there gibed him because he was powerless. Silently they went on to the bunk house and left him alone with his thoughts. In the bunk house, however, the cowboys felt free to express their opinions, and eagerly they listened to Odd Smith.

Strangely enough, Odd Smith assumed no credit, giving it all to Bill Strain, who, for the most part, sat a silent listener.

After a while voices were heard outside in the yard and the cowboys went out to watch the departure of the sheriff with his prisoners.

But Bill Strain sat alone. For his own part he had had enough of Shanan. Let the law do the rest; Bill never wanted to see the outlaw again.

The sound of the posse's horses died into silence. One or two at a time the cowboys strode back into the bunk house. Hop-Toad, Odd Smith and the little Texan began to play cards. Clem Hardrack engaged with another cowboy in an argument over the character of Shanan as compared with that of a notorious Oklahoman bandit. Nobody appeared to want anything to do with Bill.

Gloomily aware that he was still under suspicion, Bill arose and strode outside. Dusk was creeping over the desert; lights were twinkling in the Big House; far away a lone coyote was howling a doleful lament.

With his hands in his pockets, Bill leaned against the corral fence; then he took the makings from his pocket and slowly rolled a cigarette.

Crossing the yard, Gringo, the black dog of the Lazy T, came toward him and poked a cold nose in his hand.

"Outlaw blood, Gringo," said Bill softly. "Yuh can't live it down."

Gringo knew nothing and cared less about what kind of blood coursed in Bill's veins. But because he liked him, he reared up and placed his big paws on the cowboy's chest, and sighed as only a dog can sigh. Then he dropped to the ground and trotted away on business of his own.

Leaning against the fence, Bill watched the house. Suddenly he saw Betty's face pressed for an instant against the kitchen window-pane.

"Why not?" Bill asked himself. "Betty an' me are two of a kind."

Letting his half-burned cigarette fall to the earth, he ground it beneath his heel and slowly sauntered toward the house. At the corner of the building he paused as a thought struck him.

What if Mrs. Gaunt should be in the kitchen with Betty? Bill did not like the big housekeeper and he feared her biting tongue.

Reaching the vicinity of the kitchen, Bill cautiously glanced in at the window. Mrs. Gaunt was not there. Betty was alone. Seated near the table with her head resting on one hand, she seemed to be thinking.

Bill strode around to the door of the kitchen and softly rapped. Twice he knocked without receiving an answer. Then slowly he pushed open the door to find himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver, with Betty's finger on the trigger.

"Hands up!" cried Betty. Then she dropped the hand holding the weapon and the color flamed in her cheeks.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I thought it was Buck Carroll."

"It's only me," mumbled Bill, reassuringly. "Ain't yuh glad to see me back?"

Betty laid the gun back on a shelf behind her, then she turned and faced him. Little did he guess that he had not been absent from her thoughts for a moment since they had come to the Lazy T together. And still less did he think of the pain he had caused her, when he had let her see so plainly that he thought her inferior to Margaret Hen-

dricks. But the pain was there in Betty's heart just the same, and now that he had come back to her, it was the pain that caused her to answer him as she did.

"What difference could it make to me, Bill, whether you ever came back to the Lazy T?"

In astonishment he looked at her. Could this fiery-eyed girl be the same one he had brought across the Flaming Sink? Had it really been she who had stood up and spoken in his favor when he was on trial for his life? What was wrong anyway? What had he done to offend her?

Such were the questions Bill Strain asked himself as he stood fumbling his hat in his hands. For not yet could he see that from first to last he had been more concerned with planning for himself than for the happiness of the girl he hoped to marry.

"I thought," he began, "I thought—oh, Betty, don't yuh remember how we crossed the Flaming Sink together? Seems like it can't be yuh that is standing there talkin' so hard and cold."

"Why wouldn't I talk hard and cold?"

Betty asked, her dark eyes beginning to flash as her temper rose. "I was good enough for you when you didn't have another friend in the world; but after you came to the Lazy T, you got so high and mighty that you couldn't see me. Go ahead and marry Margaret Hendricks. I hate you, Bill Strain!"

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed Bill, boyishly. "Yuh don't hate me, Betty. I was jest foolin' with Margaret. She don't care nothin' about me. Jack Allerton is the fellow she aims to marry." With outstretched arms he took a step forward. "Come, honey," he begged, "let's kiss and make up."

Beside herself with jealous anger, Betty backed away.

"Kiss you!" she exclaimed. "Well, I guess not. The only man I'll ever kiss will be the one I marry, and his name won't be Bill Strain."

She should have known better than to have talked to Bill that way, for now his face flamed with anger at her defiance. Too long had he had his own way to accept calmly such a verbal lashing; least of all to accept it from the girl he loved.

"For that," he said, quietly, "I'm going to kiss yuh whether yuh like it or not," and, forgetful of his own strength, he caught her by the shoulder.

But strong though he was, she wrenched away from him. The next instant she had seized the revolver from where she had laid it. Big as a tunnel the muzzle appeared as it covered Bill Strain.

"You try and kiss me when I don't aim to be kissed," stormed Betty, "and I'll fill you plum' full of holes for Margaret Hendricks to patch."

Instinctively he backed away, with hands held high. And at that climactic moment, footsteps were heard and the housekeeper strode into the kitchen.

"For the land's sakes!" she exclaimed. "Put down that pistol, you naughty girl. Don't you know it might go off?"

"Beggin' your pardon, ma'am," said Bill Strain, "there ain't no danger. Betty an' me was just playin'."

"I never did," groaned Mrs. Gaunt, as Bill backed out of the door. "Outlaws and pistols and play-acting in the kitchen! And

Oddypuss wrote and told me this was a quiet farm in the West!"

Raging with anger, Bill strode across the yard to the corrals. His one thought was to get away where he could be by himself. And the only place where he could be alone was in the desert.

To blazes with the Lazy T and everybody on the ranch! To the devil with Shanan and his gang! And as for girls, Bill hoped that he would never see one again.

Throwing the saddle onto the back of his astonished horse with unnecessary violence, he mounted and rode away from the ranch into the desert that lay quietly smiling beneath a silver moon. Where he was going, Bill had not the slightest idea, and not until an hour later did he realize that, left to himself, his horse had followed the trail to Apache Spring.

As the rocks of the arroyo which led to the spring loomed up in the moonlight, Bill almost turned the animal aside, for there was no particular reason why he should again visit the place where he had fought Jack Allerton. Then he happened to re-

member that it was a long distance to the next water and it might be as well to let his horse drink while he had a chance. So he let the animal pick his way down the trail.

He had almost reached the bottom of the arroyo, when suddenly his horse whinnied. Instinctively Bill's right hand dropped to the Colt which swung at his hip, for an answering whinny had come from the shadow of the big rock which overhung 'Apache Spring.

Crouched low over his horse's head, Bill peered into the shadows. Dimly he could see the outline of a horse standing beneath the rock. Who had left a horse picketed at night at Apache Spring? That the animal was alone seemed evident, for plainly visible in the moonlight, Bill offered an easy target, and he felt sure that he must have been seen if the owner of the strange horse was anywhere near at hand.

And so, for the benefit of anyone who might be lurking among the rocks, Bill decided to try and bluff his way out.

Sharply his voice rang out in the still desert night.

"Hands up there! I've got yuh covered!"

There was no answer.

Twice Bill repeated his command, but each time silence met it. Far away a coyote howled. And that was all.

Puzzled and still suspicious of a trap, Bill dropped to the ground, and, leaving his horse standing on the trail, crept from rock to rock with his revolver in his hand ready to fire at an instant's warning.

But he reached the strange horse without molestation. There was no question about it, the animal was alone.

Rising to his feet, Bill approached the startled animal as it tried to back away. With quiet words he calmed its fears, and then, as he stood up and laid his hand on the animal's neck, he gave a cry of surprise, for tied securely behind the cantle of the saddle was a canvas bag, which Bill remembered seeing before.

With suddenly trembling fingers he untied the saddle strings. Taking the bag from the saddle, he stepped out into the moonlight and opened it.

Inside were the packages of currency

handed him by Bart Hendricks to pay the ransom Shanan had demanded for the safe return of Margaret—ten thousand dollars in all.

At first Bill could not believe his own eyes, for it seemed too good to be true. Here at last in his hands lay the power to vindicate himself from all suspicion of being connected with Shanan's gang. All he had to do was to ride back to the Lazy T and hand the money to Bart Hendricks with an explanation of how and where he had found it.

Still holding the money in his hands, Bill closely examined the horse. On the left stifle was the brand Lazy T. It was one of the horses rustled from the ranch by Mike Shanan or one of his gang.

Further examination showed that, in order to be sure that he would find the animal there with the money upon his return from wherever he had gone, the bandit had not only picketed the horse securely, but had also cross-hobbled it.

Leaving the animal standing in the shadow of the great rock, Bill went back to his own horse and led it to a hiding-place

farther down the arroyo, where it would be secure from the observation of anyone who should come riding down the trail. Then, taking a position among the rocks, Bill waited, gun in hand, for the return of the bandit who had stolen the money, for it seemed almost certain that he would come back after the money.

Why on earth a man should have left the money for even a short time was beyond Bill's understanding, as, hour after hour, he listened to the howling of the coyotes hunting rabbits among the cactus and sage.

Suddenly, far away, he heard the sound of a shot. Again it came; then again, to be followed by a regular fusillade of revolver shots.

Wondering what it could mean, Bill leaped to his feet. Grabbing up the bag containing the ransom money, he stood undecided what to do, as he heard the pounding of galloping hoofs coming toward Apache Spring.

Closer came the sound, closer still. Then a rider appeared on the rim of the arroyo; a rider who turned in his saddle and fired

his revolver in the direction from which he had come. Then Bill saw him sway and almost fall from the saddle, but by a supreme effort he managed to keep his seat, as his horse thundered down the trail to Apache Spring. Then he pitched from his saddle, sprawled face upward on the ground and lay still.

Running toward him, Bill threw the bag of money down. Kneeling, he stared into the face of the desperately wounded man.

It was Buck Carroll. He had been shot through the lungs.

Leaping to his feet, Bill drew his gun, as four horsemen galloped down the trail; but he did not fire. For in the bright moonlight he recognized Odd Smith, Hop-Toad, the little Texan cowboy and Clem Hardrack. With his gun hand dropped to his side, he stood staring at them, as they leaped to the ground.

"Well," exclaimed Bill, "yuh got him! What did he do?"

"Do?" echoed Odd Smith. He stared from the prone form of Buck Carroll to Bill Strain. "What are yuh doing here?"

he asked. Then catching sight of the canvas bag at Bill's feet, the little foreman of the Lazy T picked it up and drew out the packages of bills. For a moment, he stared foolishly at it, then he whipped up his gun and covered Bill Strain.

"So," he said, "it was yuh who stole the money after all!"

As Bill dropped his gun and raised his hands, Odd Smith turned to the little Texan.

"Get yore rope off'n yore saddle an' tie him up," he ordered, "an' we'll take him back to the Lazy T. The other two of yuh can load Buck Carroll on his horse, though I doubt that he'll live to reach the ranch."

"Aw, what's the use of takin' 'em back?" Clem Hardrack wanted to know. "What we'd ought to do with 'em is to hang 'em both to the nearest tree."

"What we're going to do is to hand 'em over to the sheriff," said Odd Smith coldly. "Do as I tell yuh. Get yore rope."

Stunned into silence as he realized the weight of the terrible circumstantial evidence which had overtaken him, Bill sub-

mitted quietly to having his wrists bound. Hop-Toad found and brought his horse and assisted him into the saddle. And the cowboys rode away from Apache Spring.

"What were yuh after Buck Carroll for?" asked Bill, presently.

Said Odd Smith soberly, "He knifed Betty Lorraine."

"Yuh mean—" Bill drew his tongue over lips suddenly gone dry. "Do yuh mean Buck Carroll killed Betty?"

From his vest pocket Odd Smith drew a package of gum and slipped a wafer into his mouth. Apparently it choked him so that he could not speak. It was Hop-Toad who replied to Bill's question.

"Yeah," said the tall, solemn-faced cowboy, "Buck Carroll knifed her 'cause she wouldn't run off with him. We heard her scream and took after him."

"Thank God, yuh got him!" exclaimed Bill Strain. "Is Betty—is she—"

"Yeah," said the cowboy, "Betty was still living when we left the ranch, an' she was a-callin' yore name."

CHAPTER XIX

AT BAY

BILL STRAIN asked no more questions on the way back to the ranch. Dazed by the terrible news that Betty had been stabbed by Buck Carroll, he rode in silence, which was shared by the cowboys who had made him prisoner.

So Betty was calling for him in her pain. Then she loved him after all. Queer how things can change in such a short time. Only a few hours had passed since he had seen her dark eyes flashing at him over the barrel of a revolver, as she told him she hated him. Only a little time had passed since he had ridden away a free man into the peaceful desert night, vowing that never again would he look at a girl.

And now Betty was seriously wounded, if not dying, while Bill was a prisoner accused of having stolen the ten thousand dollars which had been found in his possession at Apache Spring.

What the Hell was the use of trying to go straight? he asked himself. Why not turn outlaw once and for all? With the blood of outlaws coursing through his veins, what chance was there that he could ever make anything out of himself? Judged by the crimes his ancestors had committed, it seemed that he was not to be given a chance. Through no fault of his own, he was to be made a victim of man's inhumanity toward his fellow man.

With his name on the court records already, there seemed little chance that he could be freed of the charge of having leagued himself with Shanan, and then stolen the ransom money for his own purposes. Not one chance in ten thousand that he could escape the penitentiary.

Well, let them send him there! Sooner or later he would be freed. And when he did get free, those who had sent him there should have reason to remember the name of Bill Strain.

And so, with his own trouble overshadowing the news that Betty Lorraine had been stabbed, and his thoughts on the terrible

reckoning he would some day exact for having been so misjudged, with his wrists bound, and Odd Smith and Hop-Toad escorting him, he came again into the presence of Bart Hendricks of the Lazy T.

"We found Bill waiting for Buck Carroll at Apache Spring," explained Odd Smith. "Layin' at his feet was this bag containing the ransom money yuh sent to pay Shanan." The little foreman laid the bag on the desk of the office, into which Bart Hendricks had ushered them. "Seems like, after all," he concluded, "Bill was one of Shanan's gang, and that Bill an' Buck Carroll intended to cross the border with the money."

Leaning back in his chair, old Bart Hendricks raised his booted feet and rested them on the edge of his desk

"Is that all you've got to say, Odd?" he asked.

"There ain't no more to be said," replied the little foreman. "It's too bad. We done all we could to help Bill go straight; but it seems like it just ain't in him."

Rubbing his chin with thin fingers, Bart Hendricks gazed thoughtfully at the bag containing the money.

"Seems like there's a weak link somewhere in your chain of evidence," the old cattleman remarked after a moment. "You say you found the money in Bill's possession and that he was waiting for Buck Carroll at Apache Spring. Now what I want to know is this: why would Bill share the money with Buck Carroll when he could have got away with it alone?"

Odd Smith hesitated, moving his chewing gum from one side of his mouth to the other, in obvious disinclination to explain. Then he turned to Hop-Toad.

"Yuh tell him, Hop-Toad," he said. "I jest nacherally can't."

"It's a hard thing to have to say," commenced Hop-Toad solemnly, "but for the sake of Betty, I guess it's up to us to see that Bill Strain gets what's coming to him."

Licking lips suddenly gone dry, he paused, while all gazed at him expectantly. The ominous silence which greeted his speech was broken by Bill Strain.

"Shoot," he said, "I guess I can stand it."

"Buck Carroll died on the way back to the ranch, Bart," said Hop-Toad slowly, "and

before he died he said—" The cowboy seemed suddenly tongue-tied.

"He said?" prompted Bart Hendricks.

"Buck Carroll said," continued Hop-Toad, "that Bill offered to pay him ten thousand dollars if he would help him kidnap Betty and carry her across the border!"

"Buck Carroll was a black-hearted liar!" burst out Bill. "May his soul sizzle in Hell!"

"Didn't you say that?" asked Bart Hendricks. "Do you think Buck Carroll would have died with a lie on his lips?"

But maddened by the terrible accusation which the dying outlaw had left behind him, Bill flamed into sudden rage.

"Go ahead and think what you like!" he said bitterly. "What's the use of me sayin' anything? I'm only the son of Hair-Trigger Strain and the grandson of another outlaw. Go ahead and send me to the pen. But," he raised his bound hands and brought them crashing down on his knees, "one of these days I'll be free again, and then yuh can watch yore steps."

"Yuh see," said Odd Smith, "his outlaw blood is comin' to the top at last."

But Bart Hendricks had been watching Bill closely, and he had seen the despair mingled with the desperation in his eyes. Older and wiser than his men, the old cattleman was not disposed to be too harsh a judge. Besides, on the desk lay the money he thought he had lost. The ten thousand dollars for which he had mortgaged the stock of the Lazy T.

"It wouldn't do any good to send Bill to prison," he said slowly. "It would only make him more bitter toward the world. Besides, we have no actual proof that he is guilty. Buck Carroll's accusation may have been only the dying gesture of a desperado. We can't place much credence in that."

In sudden confusion at the outbreak he had made, Bill Strain hung his head.

"Such being the case," continued Bart Hendricks, "I think we'd better let Bill go free. We'll let him take his horse and gun, and I'll give him a pack-animal and enough grub to run him a month. Then he can go and try to make a fresh start in some part of the country where the record of the Strains is unknown."

"Do yuh mean yuh are going to drive me away from the Lazy T?" asked Bill in a hollow voice.

"You've got more than three months' wages coming to you," said Bart Hendricks. "You'll make out all right." He turned to the silent cowboys. "What do you think about it?" he asked. "Am I right?"

"I guess so," admitted Hop-Toad. "Seems like it won't hurt to give him another chance."

"Yeah, let's give him another chance, Bart," said Odd Smith. "'Tain't altogether his fault he's what he is. He's the son of Hair-Strigger Strain."

Rising to his feet, Bart Hendricks cut the ropes which bound Bill's wrists. Then he handed him his wages.

"Load up a pack-animal with grub," said the old cattleman to his foreman. "Give Bill back his gun and ammunition; then you and Hop-Toad see him off the ranch."

Bill Strain arose to his feet. Tall and straight and blue of eye, he stood looking at the man who had constituted himself his judge. After a moment he spoke.

"The boys said Betty was callin' my name. C'n I get to see her before I go?"

"I'll see," replied Bart Hendricks. "She's hurt pretty badly. We phoned to Blazing Rock for Doctor Keeth. He ought to be here at any moment now." Treading lightly, the old cattleman left the room.

"You can see her for a moment," he said, when he returned.

Bill followed Bart Hendricks into Betty's room, where Mrs. Gaunt was sitting near the head of the bed holding one of Betty's hands. She gave Bill an unfriendly stare, which he did not even see.

For all he could see, all he could think of was the white face of the girl looking up at him from the pillow, over which her dark hair strayed.

"Betty!" exclaimed Bill Strain. With cheeks gone pasty beneath his tan, he bent over her. "Betty," he repeated, "does it hurt bad?"

She tried to answer him, but only a whisper came from her lips, for Buck Carroll's knife had done something terrible to her lungs.

"Bill," she whispered. "Good-by."

Something arose in Bill's breast and clutched his heart so that he could not speak. Quietly he bent over her and kissed her. He thought they had come to the parting of the way.

"Good-by, Betty," he said chokingly. Then he blindly turned and tip-toed out of the room.

And now that he thought he had lost her, he knew that life could never be the same for him again. With his whole world crashing around his ears, he followed Bart Hendricks out of the house into the yard, where Odd Smith and Hop-Toad sat waiting on their horses.

Silently, Bill Strain swung into his saddle. Then he looked down at Bart Hendricks, standing in the moonlight that silvered the porch.

"S'long," said Bill. "Thanks for all yuh've done for me."

The old cattleman did not answer. Quietly, he turned and entered the house, closing the door behind him.

"Which way?" asked Odd Smith.

"D'yuh want to go to Blazing Rock, or where?"

"Blazing Hell!" exclaimed Bill. "No. I'm goin' back to the desert, where there ain't nobody. Give me my horse an' the desert an' a gun, an' I'll ask no odds of the world."

Being desert men themselves, they knew something of what he felt, and so they did as he asked. And at dawn, they left him, where the Red Mountains came down to meet the desert, which, mile after cactus-studded mile, reached out toward the Mexican border.

"See yuh again, sometime," was Hop-Toad's parting word.

"Maybe," said Bill, "an' maybe not."

Odd Smith took a small package from his pocket and handed it to Bill.

"Take a chaw of gum once in a while," he said. "Maybe it'll help yuh to figure things out."

Thus they left him.

And now that he was alone with the whole world before him, and freedom to do exactly as he pleased, Bill had not the slight-

est idea what it was that he wanted to do. With Betty gone out of his life and the Lazy T Ranch closed to him, he felt as homeless as a dog without a friend.

And then, suddenly, came remembrance of his mother.

Where was she? What was she doing, now that at last she was free from the influence of her outlaw brother?

Just how it was that Bill had happened to think of his mother, he did not know. He did not know that, when in trouble, a boy, the world over, will instinctively turn to his mother.

The last Bill had seen of her was when she had carried the message to the outlaws, that Shanan's life would be forfeited if they attempted to rescue him. Therefore, presumably, Isobel Strain was still in Shanan's valley. Why not go and try to persuade her to leave them? Perhaps he and his mother together could somehow establish some kind of a home remote from the world that had condemned them.

With the hundred and thirty dollars he had in his pocket, Bill might even buy a

few calves with which to start a herd of his own. As for land, he could file on a homestead somewhere in the Red Mountains. In a few years he might be independent. Other men had obtained a start in such manner. What others had done, Bill felt he could do. And in thought he added to himself: "Even if there is outlaw blood in my veins."

The more Bill thought about it, the more the plan appealed to him, for with the optimism of youth over a new idea, he did not concern himself with the difficulties he might encounter. All he could see just then was his ultimate triumph. And seeing it, he hesitated no longer, but, with his loaded pack-animal tailed out behind his saddle-horse, rode slowly up the canyon and through the secret entrance into Shanan's valley.

Not until he reached there did he realize that in all probability his mother had fled. Not until he had searched the valley from end to end, and even explored the cliff dwellings which had harbored the outlaws, did he realize that his dream had been but a dream, which had little possibility of being fulfilled.

And yet, as, seated on the rail of the corral, Bill studied the matter over, he was not so sure that he had not come to the right place, for the valley itself offered every prospect that a homesteader could desire.

Nearly a mile in length by a half mile wide, it was kept green by living springs, which bubbled up from beneath the cliffs, thus affording feed and water for quite a number of cattle.

As to a house, one could easily be built out of fragments of rock which had fallen from the cliffs, or, a man might even take up his temporary abode in one of the old cliff dwellings, just as the outlaws had done.

For the outlaws had gone, leaving little trace behind them, and with them had gone Bill Strain's mother. He was sure of that, or his search would certainly have discovered her. And he was sure the outlaws were gone, too, or they would have resented his entrance to the valley.

Still rather vague in his plans, Bill unloaded his pack-horse and turned it and his saddle-horse loose to graze. Then he built himself a fire and cooked himself a meal.

Having eaten, he busied himself the rest of the day in making a thorough exploration of the valley. And the more he saw of it, the more convinced he became that it offered unusual opportunities for stock raising.

That he would have to subsist on something until the natural increase of his stock afforded him a living, Bill did not stop to consider. Just then, the main thing seemed to be to get hold of the valley as his own property. How to go about filing on a homestead, Bill did not have any idea, but he determined that the next day he would ride into Blazing Rock and find out.

Night came to find him seated beside a campfire. At a little distance he could hear the steady champing of his horses as they grazed on the succulent grass. Above the valley, high above the red cliffs, the sky was besprinkled with stars. And it was very quiet.

Suddenly Bill remembered the gift Odd Smith had made him at parting.

"Take a chaw of gum once in a while," the little foreman had said, "maybe it'll help yuh to figure things out."

As Bill unwrapped the package Odd Smith had given him, he suddenly stared in surprise, for wrapped around a dozen packages of chewing gum were two ten dollar bills!

The firelight gleamed on Bill Strain's face, as, holding the currency in his hands, he stared across the valley.

"Can yuh beat it?" he asked of the stars. "I'll tell the weeping world yuh can't!"

Stuffing the bills in his vest pocket, he unwrapped a wafer of gum and slipped it in his mouth. Then, with his head between his hands, he sat a long time gazing beyond the fire.

And presently he thought he saw Betty Lorraine standing beside the fire holding out her hands toward him. Softly her voice seemed to reach him.

"Bill. Oh, Bill."

So realistic was the vision and the voice that Bill leaped to his feet and stood gazing hungrily into the shadows beyond the fire. But they were only shadows after all, seemingly brought to life by his dreams.

He sat down again, discarded his gum, and

lit a cigarette in the hope that the tobacco would quiet his nerves. And it did to a certain extent, so that at last he rolled himself in his blankets and tried to sleep.

But instead of sleeping he found himself thinking of Betty. Was she dead, and was it her spirit that had come to visit him at his fire? Or was she on the way to recovery? If she were to get well, would she come with him as his wife to live on a homestead in Shanan's valley?

Shanan's valley? No, he mustn't call it that any longer. What should he call it? Guess he'd leave that to Betty—if she got well.

He slept at last, fitfully and with much moaning, as though his spirit were in pain. And while he slept, dawn stole into the walled valley and with rosy finger-tips beckoned him awake.

He arose with the vision of Betty still before him, and the longing to know how she fared on her bed of pain, if she were still—

But he put that thought from him with words that were not nice to hear, being, as they were, the expression of his own pain.

"She's just got to live!" he murmured fiercely as he saddled his horse. "Her an' me c'n make a home here in this li'l ol' valley."

Eager though he was to know how Betty fared, he rode around the Lazy T Ranch. He did not want to meet Bart Hendricks again so soon. Anyway they would know all about it in Blazing Rock, where Doctor Keeth lived.

Late that afternoon, Bill rode into Blazing Rock on a leg-weary animal, that was too tired just then to eat the oats Bill poured for him in the livery barn, run by old Tim Gaddis, one-time wrangler on the Lazy T.

"Heard any news from the Lazy T?" asked Bill, in what he tried to make a casual tone.

"Yuh still ridin' for Bart?" asked Tim Gaddis, blinking at Bill with watery blue eyes.

"Nacherally, bein' a rider I'm still ridin'," said Bill, evasively.

"Then how come yuh don't know that Doc Keeth went out to the Lazy T yestiddy?" asked Tim Gaddis suspiciously.

"Ain't he back yet?" asked Bill.

"No. He ain't likely to be, neither, from what I've heard," said Tim Gaddis. "But as I was sayin', how come—"

He stopped speaking and his mouth fell open in sudden surprise.

"Lissen!" he exclaimed. "Thar's shootin' goin' on over to the jail."

Whipping his gun from its holster, and followed by the old wrangler, Bill rushed to the door of the barn.

Standing on the steps of the jail with a revolver in each hand, Mike Shanan and the two outlaws who had been captured with him were shooting at everybody in sight.

CHAPTER XX

HOP-TOAD PLAYS BALL

CATCHING sight of Bill, as he stepped out of the door of the livery barn, Shanan shouted, mockingly:

"Here goes the soul of the last of the Strains!"

As he spoke, his guns crashed out and two forty-five slugs sped past Bill's head.

Struck by a bullet, Tim Gaddis spun half around, then he threw up his arms and crumpled to the floor, as Bill's gun answered Shanan's shots.

Standing on the jail steps at Shanan's side, an outlaw pitched face forward and rolled into the street.

Once more Shanan fired, and a bullet clipped the top of one of Bill's ears; then, realizing that he was no match at shooting it out with the son of Hair-Trigger Strain, Shanan dodged back into the jail and slammed the heavy door.

With the blood from his torn ear trickling down one side of his face and his blue eyes blazing with excitement, Bill stooped over the body of Tim Gaddis. But there was nothing he could do; the old wrangler had been shot between the eyes.

Suddenly, Bill straightened up, for outside the firing had commenced again. Half sheltered by the door of the barn, he glanced across the street. Every door was closed, but from the windows the citizens of Blazing Rock were pouring a rain of bullets into the jail in which the outlaw chief had taken refuge. But no answering shot came from the jail. Apparently, Shanan had either been killed or had fled by a rear door.

Undecided just how to act, Bill stood watching; then, suddenly, his heart seemed to stop beating for a second, as in the distance he heard the sound of galloping horses. In another minute a dozen riders appeared at the end of the street. Whooping and yelling, they tore into the little cattle town, shooting the glass out of every window in sight.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Bill Strain. "Shanan's men!"

Whipping up his revolver, he fired, and the foremost rider lurched and fell sideways from his saddle. As he fell his foot caught in the stirrup. His horse dragged him a few yards, then his foot pulled lose from the stirrup and he rolled into the street and lay still, while his horse fled back into the desert from which he had come.

Across the street from the livery barn, a man fired from a window, and another outlaw fell; then a volley of shots from the outlaws' guns smashed the glass to atoms, some of which tinkled onto the board sidewalk. Slumped across the window-sill, with one hand still holding his gun, the citizen lay still, with his head lying on his outflung arm. After a moment, the gun fell from his fingers and clattered to the street.

Again Bill Strain fired, and this time the outlaws realized that the shot came from the barn. With a yell, they fired all together, and a rain of slugs drove white splinters of wood almost into Bill's face, as he slammed together the heavy double doors.

Knowing that he would instantly be shot down if he stepped outside, Bill ran out of

the rear door into the corral. Across it he sped, and over a fence. Then across another street, and up a flight of steps, which led to the rear door of the building in which was Sheriff Austen's office and the jail from which Shanan had made his escape.

Running up the steps, Bill darted through the open door into a long corridor, at each side of which a row of iron-latticed doors fronted the cells. Three of the cell doors were open. Across the threshold of the last one lay Sheriff Austen, with blood pouring from a wound in his back.

At Bill's approach he raised his head.

"Ah," he groaned, "then you are one of Shanan's men."

Too shocked to feel resentment at the unjust accusation, Bill snapped out a denial in a few words of explanation. The eyes of the dying sheriff cleared.

"My mistake," he said, huskily. "Sorry."

"How did Shanan get loose?" asked Bill. "The town is full of his men."

"'Twas your mother—Shanan's sister—" explained the old sheriff between labored breaths. "She asked to see Shanan—knifed

me as I turned my back. Took my keys—turned Shanan loose. I was all alone. My deputy is out of town."

He ceased speaking, and tried to raise his head as the sound of running footsteps reached his ears. Bill Strain whirled with raised gun, as a man dashed up the rear steps of the jail. But he did not fire, for the newcomer was the lawyer who had defended Bill at his trial, Justus McQuarrie.

Precise as ever, even in that terrible moment, he looked from the sheriff on the floor to the gun in Bill Strain's hand.

"I'm very much afraid," he said, "that this time the circumstantial evidence will prove your undoing, Bill Strain." With a white silk handkerchief he mopped the blood from a cut on one cheek.

"It's all right, Mac," whispered the sheriff. "Bill is on the square. I was stabbed by Isobel Strain."

His voice grew fainter and he did not speak again for a minute. Then:

"Mac, for the sake of our old friendship, take my sheriff's star and pin it on Bill Strain. I call you to witness that the last

thing I did was to make him actin' sheriff of Frontier County. Bill will clean it up, I know. He's the Hair-Trigger brand."

Tall and straight, Bill stood looking at Justus McQuarrie, as the little attorney unpinned the silver star from the dying sheriff's shirt.

"Aw," exclaimed Bill, "I don't know nothin' about sheriffin'."

"You don't need to know anything, Bill," whispered the sheriff. "Get Mike Shanan. That's all you have to do."

"Quite irregular," muttered Justus McQuarrie. "I cannot hold myself responsible."

"Oh, shut up, Mac," said Sheriff Austen, "and have Bill take the sheriff's oath to perform his duty without fear or favor."

As Justus McQuarrie pinned the silver star on Bill Strain, Sheriff Austen died with a smile on his bronzed face.

"A most terrible situation," commented Justus McQuarrie, when they had laid a blanket over the body. "Acting Sheriff Bill Strain, may I inquire as to what will be the nature of your first official act? I came here

with the intention of informing the late Sheriff Austen that Mike Shanan and his outlaw band have left Blazing Rock after shooting down seven men, among whom was my esteemed colleague, Mr. Nathan Cultus, prosecuting attorney of Frontier County."

"Guess we better go set in the office and talk it over," mumbled Bill, thoughtfully, fingering his sheriff's star.

But they did not talk it over in the sheriff's office; for on the floor lay the body of Isobel Strain. The fingers of her right hand were still clutching the key with which she had released her outlaw brother, Mike Shanan. Above her, a window had been shattered by the bullet which had struck her down. An empty gun rack at one end of the office showed how Shanan had procured weapons.

With the silk from around his own neck, Bill Strain covered the face of his mother. Shakily he spoke.

"Well, Mr. McQuarrie, I guess I'm the last of the Strains."

"With the possibility of becoming the

father of a new line of Strains who should become a credit to the State of Arizona," said the little attorney. He blew his nose violently, then asked suddenly, "How is Miss Betty Lorraine?"

"There's no time to talk about her now," said Bill, curtly. "The first thing we had better do is to organize a posse of citizens. The next thing I shall do will be to deputize Odd Smith and Hop-Toad. Between the three of us we ought to get Mike Shanan. By the way, have you seen Ranger Jack Allerton lately?"

"I have," replied Justus McQuarrie. "Owing to the sudden demise of the county clerk, I have been temporarily assigned to his office. Yesterday I was requested by Mr. Jack Allerton to issue a license permitting him to marry Miss Margaret Hendricks of the Lazy T Ranch. I believe that the—er—fortunate couple are only awaiting the complete recovery of Miss Betty Lorraine."

Dazed by the terrible calamity which had befallen their town, the people of Blazing Rock were only too glad to find that Bill Strain was on the side of law and order. But

there were several objections when Justus McQuarrie explained the dying request of Sheriff Austen.

"Bill Strain sheriff!" exclaimed a good woman who had lost her husband in the fight. "Why, what can he do? He's only a boy."

But a grizzled old cowman with a tobacco-stained chin took up the challenge.

"Only a boy is right," he admitted. "But then, so was Billy the Kid. Yet, if I don't disremember, he was the most fearless gunman of his day. Give Bill Strain a chance is what I say. Seems like so far he ain't had none at all."

And so it was that, after riding all night at the head of a dozen men, as Acting Sheriff of Frontier County, Arizona, Bill Strain came again to the Lazy T Ranch, as dawn was breaking over the Red Mountains.

The news of the fight at Blazing Rock had already reached the ranch, for a terrified operator at the central office had phoned in a request that the Lazy T cowboys be sent to help defeat the outlaws. But the fight was over before the cowboys came in from

their work on the range, and a later call announced that Bill Strain with a posse of citizens was on the way to the ranch. So Bart Hendricks showed no surprise when he saw the sheriff's star pinned on Bill's shirt.

"You'll find the boys ready and waiting," he said. "I had all I could do to hold 'em."

He made no mention of the silver star Bill wore; nor did Bill himself speak of the office which had been practically forced upon him. Painfully conscious of the badge he wore, it made him feel as uncomfortable as a calf with the pain of a fresh brand searing its hip.

"How's Betty?" he asked after a moment.

"Doctor Keeth is with her now," replied Bart Hendricks. "He says she has an even chance for recovery. No, you can't see her, Bill, yet. Perhaps by the time you get back—"

"All right," said Bill. "I understand. Thank God, she is goin' to get well."

Bart Hendricks watched him as he strode over to the bunk house, before which the Lazy T cowboys were expectantly waiting. Bounding at Bill's heels, Gringo, the black

dog of the Lazy T, followed him across the yard.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed Hop-Toad as he saw the star on Bill's shirt. "Better mind yore steps, cowboys, or he'll pinch the whole damned bunch of us."

Leaning against the door-jamb of the bunk house, Odd Smith looked up at Bill Strain.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he drawled. "Do yuh ever chaw gum?"

A grim smile creased Bill's lips, and the eyes that he turned on the little foreman were those of a boy suddenly grown old.

"I reckon I could make a big talk about deputizin' yuh boys," he said, "but I guess it don't matter. Odd, seein' as yuh know the trail, I'd like yuh to take a dozen men and block the entrance to Shanan's valley. Meanwhile, Hop-Toad and I will ride by another trail to the top of the cliffs over which Shanan bluffed us into thinkin' he was goin' to shove Margaret Hendricks to her death."

"How do yuh know Shanan will make his last stand in the valley?" asked Odd Smith,

while the other riders stared at the star on Bill's shirt.

"He won't try makin' any stand at all if he can help it," replied Bill. "But he will try to hide out in the valley until he and his gang can cross the border. And they can't get across now, for I phoned Ranger Jack Allerton from Blazing Rock, and he and his men are guarding every point where the outlaws might try to cross into Mexico."

"Shanan has about as much chance of remaining hidden in the valley as a centipede would have on a billiard ball," said Odd Smith. "Why, man alive, we saw the whole valley from end to end, and there ain't cover enough in it to hide a tick."

There was a peculiar gleam in Bill Strain's eyes as he looked at Odd Smith.

"I hate to tell yuh so," he said, "but bein' for the time sheriff of the county, what I say goes. An' my orders to yuh are to guard the entrance to Shanan's valley, and keep the outlaws from escapin', even if yuh have to shoot 'em down to the last man."

For a moment the eyes of the two men met, then Odd Smith grinned sheepishly.

"Orders is orders, Sheriff," he said with assumed meekness, and he took a chew of gum.

At the mouth of the canyon which led to the one by which Bill Strain had first entered Shanan's valley, Bill Strain and Hop-Toad left the grumbling posse on guard, with strict orders not to attempt to enter the valley itself. Then, in company with Hop-Toad, Bill himself rode back down the canyon and up a long ridge, which sloped upward for nearly a mile, at last to lose itself among the almost inaccessible mountains which over-topped Shanan's valley. On top of the ridge, Bill Strain halted his horse.

"Look," he said to Hop-Toad, "there is the other trail by which Shanan and his gang returned to the valley."

Hop-Toad's eyes almost bulged from his head, as he followed the direction of Bill's pointing finger, for their horses were standing on a well-worn trail—too well worn in the solid rock to have been made by the occasional passing of the outlaws.

"It is the old trail by which the cliff dwellers used to leave the valley centuries ago,"

explained Bill. "I found it when I came to Shanan's valley alone looking for a place to homestead." He paused and looked the tall cowboy in the eye. Then he added, "At its other end, this trail drops into a basin that I think was used as a temple by the cliff dwellers. If I don't miss my guess we shall find the outlaws' horses there."

"D'yuh mean that yuh and me are goin' to tackle that gang alone?" asked Hop-Toad soberly.

"Yes," replied Bill Strain, quietly.

"Yuh're crazy!" exclaimed Hop-Toad. "Locoed from the neck up!"

"Not so crazy as yuh think." For the first time since Buck Carroll stabbed Betty, Bill laughed.

Grumbling beneath his breath, Hop-Toad rode behind Bill for a mile. Then, at Bill's suggestion, they both dismounted.

"Lay down and crawl behind me," he said, "an' I'll show yuh what I discovered."

They crawled forward among rocks that gradually became larger and more numerous, until at last the trail was hemmed in by high red walls of sandstone, from which

huge fragments had fallen on top of each other by the thousands. Among these boulders whip-tailed lizards scurried in alarm at the slow approach of the human intruders. Somewhere out of sight among the débris a rock wren was singing.

That the outlaws had lately passed that way was evidenced by the marks of many hoofs in the thin red dust which covered the trail. But where they could have left their horses it was beyond Hop-Toad's power to guess.

Suddenly Bill raised his hand as a signal for Hop-Toad to stop. Then he pointed downward.

"Look," he whispered. "There are Shanan's horses, just where I guessed we'd find them."

With his heart beating so hard that he could hardly get his breath, Hop-Toad looked over Bill's shoulder.

They had reached the end of a trail that dropped at an exceedingly steep incline into a tiny, almost circular basin, eroded out of the red sandstone by the winds of unnumbered centuries.

That the basin had once been used as an outdoor temple seemed very probable, for in the center of it was a low structure which appeared at one time to have been used as an altar. It was formed of an immense flat slab of sandstone supported upon rudely carved pillars of the same material.

This Hop-Toad saw at a glance. But he gave it little thought, for, picketed and ready for instant flight, a number of saddled horses stood around with drooping heads. But there was not a human being in sight.

"We've got their horses anyway," exulted Hop-Toad. "But where the devil is Shanan and his gang?"

"There is a narrow stairway hewn out of the side of the cliff which drops from this basin into Shanan's valley," explained Bill Strain. "The gang must have returned to the main valley, as I knew they would, for Shanan has a stock of supplies in one of the old cliff dwellings."

He arose to his feet.

"If we can gain the head of those stairs," he said, "before the outlaws discover our presence here, we've got 'em. Their only

way of retreat is through the exit Odd Smith and his posse are guarding."

Revolvers in hand, they ran down the trail into and across the basin, to a point where it seemed to drop a thousand feet into Shanan's valley. And there they fell to their knees behind a big red boulder which lay at the edge of the cliff.

Below them they could see a zigzag line of roughly hewn steps leading to the valley below. They saw something else, too; something which caused Hop-Toad to swear softly, as he rested his elbow on top of the boulder and sighted along the barrel of his six-chambered gun.

One behind the other, up the cliff dwellers' stairs, a dozen heavily armed men were climbing. Each man bore a load of provisions on his back.

"Don't shoot yet," ordered Bill Strain, sharply.

Then he arose to his feet. Tall and straight, he stood on the edge of the cliff, with the sun shining on the sheriff's star he wore. With a revolver in each hand covering the climbing outlaws, he shouted sternly:

"Drop those guns and come up one at a time. I arrest yuh in the name of the law."

Like one man, the line of climbers stopped and gazed upward. Then, with a hoarse oath, an outlaw fired at the tall figure on the edge of the cliff and a bullet winged its way past Bill's head.

Then both Bill's guns spoke sharply and two outlaws pitched backward. Striking others in their fall, the dead men knocked them head over heels into the valley below.

Without saying a word to Bill, Hop-Toad threw his shoulder against the boulder behind which he knelt. Almost balanced, the huge rock left its bed, turned over, left the top of the cliff, and, bouncing from step to step, carried to his doom the last of Shanan's gang.

"Play ball!" exclaimed Hop-Toad. "I've knocked 'em for a home run!"

Suddenly, he clapped a hand to his shoulder and staggered backward from the cliff, as a shot rang out from behind.

Whirling in his tracks, Bill Strain saw Mike Shanan himself, sitting his horse at the top of the trail, above the basin where the outlaws had left their horses.

Twice Bill answered the outlaw chief's shots, but the distance was too great for him to be sure of his aim.

"Hurt bad?" he asked Hop-Toad.

"I c'n make out," groaned the cowboy. "Go get Shanan."

Breaking into a run, Bill caught the nearest of the outlaws' horses and leaped upon its back. At a gallop, he rode across the basin and up the trail from the top of which Shanan had shot Hop-Toad.

From the top of the trail, he saw Mike Shanan spurring his horse madly along the ridge that led downward into the cactus-studded desert, beyond which lay the Mexican border.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HAIR-TRIGGER BRAND

WITH a yell that struck terror to the heart of the fleeing outlaw, Bill Strain urged his horse forward in pursuit. Forgotten was the fact that Mike Shanan was his mother's brother. All that Bill thought of then was the face of his mother as he had seen her last, where she lay struck down by a bullet.

A hundred yards ahead, Shanan glanced backward over his shoulder, and blinked his eyes, as the sunlight gleamed on the star of Law and Order worn by Hair-Trigger Strain's son. At that distance, Shanan could not be mistaken as to the nature of the gleaming object, and bitter oaths volleyed from his lips, as madly he spurred his horse in an effort to reach safety beyond the border.

Bitterly, too, the outlaw regretted that he had no rifle on his saddle, for he would have shot Bill down with as little compunction as

he had shown when he had betrayed Hair-Trigger Strain to the rangers.

But if Shanan had no rifle, neither had Bill. Armed only with revolvers, the two men were evenly matched, except in one thing. And that was that in all that section of Arizona, no man could equal the skill of Bill Strain with a six-chambered gun.

Fully aware of that fact, Shanan felt no desire to come within range of Bill's deadly aim; for, now that Bill represented the law, the outlaw felt sure that he would be shot down if ever Bill drew close enough to use his gun. And so, with spur and quirt and oath, Mike Shanan urged his horse into a dead run down the trail which led to the desert.

Had he been mounted on his big black, he could easily have outdistanced his pursuer, but the big black horse lay dead in the livery barn of Tim Gaddis, shot down by one of the bullets which had been intended for Bill Strain.

Down the ridge they thundered in a cloud of red dust. Fifty yards separated them when they reached the desert at the foot of

the Red Mountains; fifty yards, that had become forty before they had covered another mile.

And then, with the fear of death upon him, Mike Shanan drew his forty-five, and half turning in his saddle, fired again and again. Not at Bill Strain, but at the horse he rode. For, with the animal down, Shanan knew he would have ample time to cross the border.

Even had he succeeded in shooting Bill's horse, the outlaw had no intention of coming within range of Bill's deadly aim. For, with his new authority at his back, Bill would shoot to kill, Shanan felt sure. And he had no intention of being killed while himself trying to kill his pursuer. All he wanted now was to get away into another land, where, perhaps, he could more safely pursue his nefarious career.

But his horse was failing beneath him, as the shortening distance began to show, and still his bullets went wild of their mark, as he tried to bring Bill's horse down. Alive to his danger, Bill was leaning forward in his saddle, with only his head showing be-

neath his horse's neck, as, Indian fashion, he rode zigzaggedly ahead, never in a straight line.

Still Bill did not fire, not even when Shanan had used his last cartridge and, instead of yards, only feet, to the number of fifty, separated the two riders.

Suddenly, Bill sat erect in his saddle, and his clear young voice reached the ears of the cursing outlaw.

"Throw up yore hands, Mike Shanan, in the name of the law."

Yelling curses, Shanan drove his spurs deep into his horse's sides, in one last effort to escape. Maddened by the pain, the animal balked, reared up and fished for the sky, and then from Bill's right hand a lariat writhed snakily through the air, and the loop settled over Shanan's head and shoulders, tightened and pinned his arms to his sides, and dragged him, still cursing, from the saddle.

At a word from Bill, his horse leaned sideways and held the slack of the rope, for once he had been a cow-horse on the Lazy T. Leaping to the ground, Bill ran forward. As

he ran, he dragged from his pocket a pair of steel handcuffs that gleamed in the sun. There was a sudden click as he stooped over the roped man. Standing at a little distance, the outlaw's horse heard the click of the handcuffs, and he turned his head and sighed.

"I arrest yuh, in the name of the law, Mike Shanan," said Acting Sheriff Bill Strain.

A cloud of dust appeared in the distance; then, shortly, a rider came into view. A rider who drooped in his saddle, with his left arm hanging limp at his side. A little later Hop-Toad rode up.

"Well," he said, "yuh got him."

"Yeah," assented Bill Strain.

"After yuh left," said Hop-Toad, "I took another look over the cliff. Odd Smith and his bunch were in the valley pickin' up the pieces of Shanan's gang."

"Guess they must have got tired of waiting," said Bill.

"So I hollered to 'em that yuh was after Shanan," said Hop-Toad, "and to meet us at the ranch."

"How'd yuh know I'd make good?" asked Bill, fingering the badge on his shirt.

"I jest knowed it," said Hop-Toad. "Yuh are the stuff that sheriffs are made of. The Hair-Trigger brand."

"Hair-Trigger Hell!" exploded Mike Shanan. "It was just luck. For the only reason I happened up there was 'cause I couldn't get into the valley the other way."

But they made him mount his horse, and, riding one at each side of him, they took Shanan back to the Lazy T, and put his arms around a snubbing-post in the breaking-corral, and handcuffed his wrists and left him there.

Bart Hendricks and Mrs. Gaunt, the housekeeper, came out and surveyed him with sad eyes.

"Are you really an outlaw, Mr. Shanan?" asked the red-headed housekeeper.

In one last attempt at bravado, Mike Shanan smiled fiercely beneath his red mustache.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I'm bad from the boots up."

"You horrid man," said Mrs. Gaunt with

a sniff, and she fled to the sanctuary of the house.

"Guess I'll phone Ranger Jack Allerton that we've got Shanan and his men," said Bart Hendricks, "and I'll tell Doctor Keeth to come to the bunk house and fix up Hop-Toad's shoulder."

"So the Doc is still here!" exclaimed Bill. "How—how is Betty? May I see her? I shall have to stay here until Odd Smith and the posse get back. Then we shall take Shanan and any of his gang who survive to the jail at Blazing Rock."

"Betty is getting along all right, thanks to Doctor Keeth," replied Bart Hendricks. "You can come with me."

Betty was reclining on a couch beside the window of her room, when Bill Strain entered. He stood in the doorway for a full minute before she turned her head and saw him, with the afternoon sunlight gleaming on the silver star he wore.

"Oh, Bill!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Bill!" With a hand pressed to her heart, she stared at him. Her white face was like a lily against her clustered dark hair.

Softly he crossed the room and knelt beside her, and she laid a hand on his head. For a little while their hearts were too full for speech.

"So you made good," said Betty at last. "I always knew you would, boy of the desert that you are. The old Hair-Trigger brand."

"Guess I don't amount to much, Betty," said Bill. "I thought I did for a while, but seems like I can't never become civilized. Seems like all I care about is the desert—and you."

"Do you really want me, Bill?" she whispered.

"I've always wanted you, Betty," he said. "Somehow, though, it took me a long time to find it out. I was wondering whether yuh'd marry me some day—when I've made a start raisin' stock of my own. I know of a place—"

Softly Betty Lorraine ran her fingers through his hair, as she whispered:

"Why wait so long, Bill? Margaret and Jack Allerton are to be married here next Sunday afternoon. Why not make it a double wedding here at the Lazy T?"

Ten minutes later, Mrs. Gaunt, the housekeeper, entered the room, to stare in amazement at a girl who had both arms clasped around the neck of a lengthy young man, in bat-wing chaparejos, who was kneeling at the side of her couch.

"For the land's sakes!" exclaimed Mrs. Gaunt, her cheeks suddenly vying with the color of her hair. "I never did see such a farm in all my born days!"

Flushing with annoyance, Bill rose to his feet and glared at the worthy woman. Then, suddenly, he smiled and turned to Betty.

"Seems like it's catchin', honey," he said. "Look, Odd Smith's sister is wearin' a brand new diamond engagement ring!"

"And it's the right I have to wear it, young man," said Mrs. Gaunt severely. "Bart wants me to help him run this farm. He says I'm a very competent woman."

"Congratulations, ma'am," said Bill Strain. "I'll tell the weeping world yuh are all wool and a yard wide."

"None of your lip, young man," said Mrs. Gaunt. "What I came to tell you is that Oddypuss is wanting you outside."

Outside Bill found the posse, with seven bruised and battered outlaws.

"We got tired of waitin'," explained Odd Smith. "So we snuck into Shanan's valley. We was just in time to see a whole caboodle of men come slitherin' down out of the sky. Later, we buried five of 'em. Here are the other seven."

"Place a guard over 'em," ordered Bill. "After supper we'll take 'em into Blazing Rock."

"Guess peace has overtook the Lazy T at last," said Odd Smith. "Lyddy is aimin' to hog-tie ol' Bart an' call the ranch a farm. Margaret is figurin' on marryin' Jack Allerton and going to live in Blazing Rock, and me, I'm thinkin' of asking Betty to become the wife of a certain bow-legged li'l runt—"

"No, yuh don't!" said Bill, sharply. "Betty an' I are to be married Sunday afternoon."

"That so?" With very wide eyes, Odd Smith gazed across the desert, miles and miles of desert, cactus-ridden and waterless, shining beneath the setting sun. A mystical land of terrible beauty, a primeval land,

vassal only to the law of fang and claw, and —Great Mother to the men of the Hair-Trigger brand.

"That so?" murmured Odd Smith again. "Wal, hope yuh'll be happy, Bill."

And the little bow-legged foreman of the Lazy T took a chew of gum.

THE END